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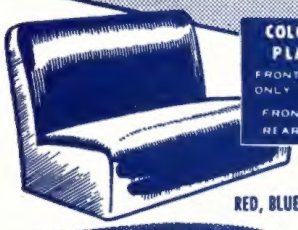

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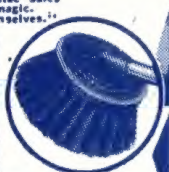

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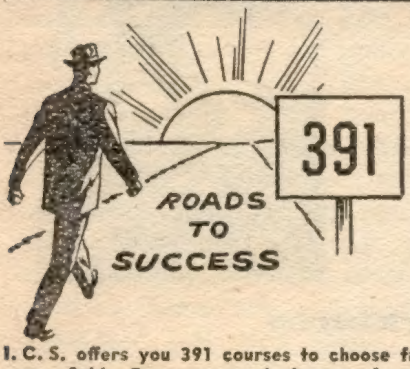

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 16 October, 1952 Number 3

2 Action - Packed, Thrilling Feature Novels

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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THE TRADING POST

A Department of True Stories

SAM HOUSTON'S SON

by Lauran Paine

THERE ARE few Americans, especially Southwesterners, who do not know the name "Sam Houston". Houston was born in Virginia in the year 1793. He was commander-in-chief of the Texas forces that met the Mexican General Santa Anna in the battle of San Jacinto, defeated the Mexicans and captured their leader, thus securing for Texas her independence from Mexico. He was twice President of the Texas Republic, and was directly responsible for gaining admission of Texas into the Union as a state.

Houston died in 1863, a sorrowing man, for despite his warnings against secession, Texas had withdrawn from the Union and was being bled white and humbled by the Civil War.

Houston had several children, but none of them achieved the greatness or brilliance of their illustrious father. Of only one are we concerned, however, and his name was Templeton

[*Turn To Page* 8]

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Houston. Templeton Houston passed the bar examinations and was a duly credited lawyer. He was known as a good orator, a heavy drinker and a clever attorney. There were facts of his personality that did not rank among the accepted standards of the time as outstanding virtues; consequently, he was held in contempt and dislike by many people, despite the fact that he did achieve some success as a politician—both in Texas and the Indian Territory, where he resided for awhile.

Templeton Houston was attorney for the prosecution in a baizarre case against a man charged with murder. He particularly wanted to win the case for the notoriety it would bring him, plus the fact that the man who had been killed had been a friend of his. He worked mightily to build up a good case against the accused, and in court used every bit of eloquence at his command.

Defense attorney for the accused man was an attorney named Jennings, brother to the outlaw Al Jennings—at that time wanted for murder among other things, including train and bank robbery. Jennings was a capable attorney, equal to Houston in every respect, and superior in many. He was popular and friendly, honest and clever. At one time, he had been on the dodge with his famous brother, Al, but had long since turned respectable—while the brother Al rode the owlhoot trail, a gunman and a highwayman, until he was finally apprehended and sent to prison. Strangely enough Al Jennings was imprisoned for robbing the mails. He was never convicted of homicide, yet his list of killings was long and positive. Al was a diminutive redhead, as deadly as a sidewinder and faster with a gun than a streak of lightning.

The trial, in which the accused was only a pawn in a far larger game that roared and flashed over the Southwest long after the defendant's name had been forgotten, dragged on for some time. First Houston would sway the jury and the populace with his eloquence; then Jennings would influence them with his dry humor, honest observations and quiet manners. The verdict hung in the balance, and feverish interest and betting was running high when the verdict of "not guilty" was handed down—thus freeing a man quite likely guilty as charged.

After the trial, Attorney Jennings and his friends adjourned to a local saloon. The had a drink or two and were laughingly discussing the trial when Houston came in. The Texan was furious at his defeat before Jennings, but said nothing about it. He had several toughs with him and they all lined up at the bar. The atmosphere was tense, but Jennings chose to ignore it; he strolled to a card table and watched the game. Houston removed his hat and nodded to one of his men. The man strode up to Jennings and began an argument about the trial. Jennings, according to witnesses, calmly pointed out to the tough that the verdict stood as final judgement, and there was nothing more to be said. His words were heard by everyone in the saloon. The tough continued his tirade, and became mildly abusive, but avoided anything that might cause Jennings to go for his gun.

While Attorney Jennings and the argumentative stranger were in discussion, Houston slipped up behind Jennings, shoved a derringer within inches of his head and fired. The result was devastating; Jennings' head was blown apart and gore splattered those who had not been able to get out of the line of fire.

IMMEDIATELY after the killing, Houston left the saloon in company with his friends and Jennings was left where he had fallen—to be buried later by close friends and relatives. Attorney Jennings' father was a minister and with white lips read the services over his beloved son.

Word of the killing spread across the desolate reaches of the West. In

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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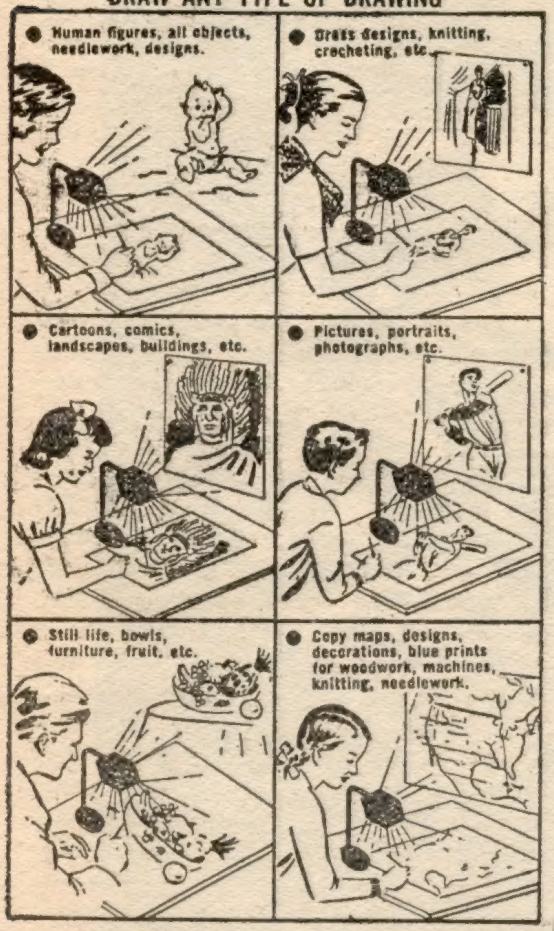

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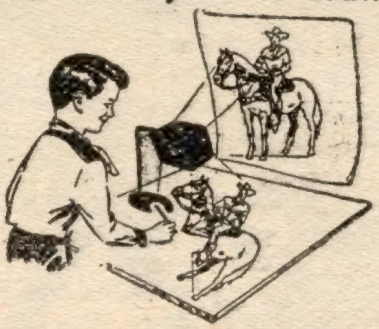

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Jarris clapped his hand over Louise's mouth to stifle her scream as pistols roared outside the stable . . .

COLD TRAIL

Was Louise Lees secretly in love with this man, Ollendorf, or did she really fear him? Martin Jarris was gambling his life on that question, when he arranged with Louise to turn up at the Double L ranch — where Ollendorf and his gang ruled — posing as the girl's long-lost cousin!

Feature Novel of Deadly Menace

by J. J. Mathews

A COWBOY skirted the dance floor and bent to whisper in the cauliflower ear of the burly man sitting with the blonde. Martin Jarris made ready for action because that whisper might concern him, and Jarris never took chances he could avoid.

The burly man, built like a catch-as-catch-can wrestler, his jowls bluish even after a shave, left his companion at the table, and trailed the waddy through the connecting door into the smoke-clouded bar, where Jarris could no longer see him. The professor at the piano, swigging the dregs of his beer, struck up another jig, and couples rose to trip the light fantastic in the *Road To Ruin*.

Jarris stayed where he was. He stole

another look at the deserted blonde, who was pretty—but, he thought, sulky. This time she caught his glance, and he wondered how it was that females so quickly grew aware of masculine interest, no matter how overt. "Their business, I suppose," he said to himself, and let his eyes slide from hers.

In that brief exchange, however, he decided she wasn't sulking, but was tense—perhaps with fear.

He began to consider what might turn out to be a fatal error on his part. Could he use her? He had no sentimental notions, but she might prove useful. He must weigh the odds, for here was a promising shortcut in an otherwise lengthy job. He knew who she was. Her name was Louise Lees, and her father owned the Double L ranch in this northeast Texas land where the forests broke the range. The blue-jowled man was Dirk Ollendorf who worked for the Lees.

Jarris had come to town that afternoon, and knew how to stay inconspicuous—just as he had his own ways of gleaning pertinent information. He seldom pumped bartenders; while they usually had all the gossip, they were also liable to be dangerous—they would act as spies for the home talent.

He looked again, and with the deliberate intention of meeting Louise Lees' gaze. She was waiting and he held on until she was convinced she had made a conquest; she lowered her eyes and gave a ladylike cough.

Jarris' long, leather-cased legs stuck out. His trousers were tucked into half-boots decorated with the Texas lone star, and a flannel shirt set off good shoulders. There was nothing to indicate that he was one of the best free-lance range investigators in the Southwest. Cold and experienced, he had served in the Texas Rangers for three years, and at times still cooperated with them and with other law officers; but as a rule, Jarris preferred to conduct his preliminary checking alone. He had brought off some neat coups and captures, working on a temporary salary paid by his clients—or for the blood money when it amounted to enough.

West of the timber belt, on the open, rolling plains below the Red River, lay several big outfits, and these ranchers had employed Jarris as a last resort. Such owners, with great herds, were apt to be careless and sometimes let months elapse between tallies of their stock. But they had become convinced that thieves were at work, and a count showed a serious loss. The reason they had checked at the time was because a line-rider had been killed. After a search, the cowboy's body had been found, where it had been tossed into a ravine in the woods demarcating the east range. By the time Jarris had been called in there had remained only a cold trail, tramped over by eager but amateurish hunters. It was plain the line-rider must have run into the thieves, who had shot him and left in a hurry.

After careful investigation, Jarris had decided that eastward was the direction the stolen cattle had been driven; inquiry had told him that pushing stock over the open country around the Red would certainly have been noticed. Through his maps, Jarris had concluded that the Double L must have been used as a depot or a crossover; that was why he had come to Silverton, the raw, ugly settlement on Silver River. That was why he had been watching Dirk Ollendorf and Louise Lees. The immediate section was unfamiliar to him and he had to get to know it, and its inhabitants, before proceeding.

The rustlers had killed a man; they would be on the watch, fearing pursuit. It was a dangerous job, but Jarris was used to that.

HE STOOD up and stared fixedly at the girl. She knew he was there, but didn't give any sign. He turned and went to a back door, dodging dancing couples. He paused before going out, and glanced back; then he

opened the door and stepped into the service street.

A lantern burned low and the stable cast a bulky, black shadow. Off to his left was a carriage-shed, but from the stoop Jarris could see only the dark maw of its open front.

The blonde came out a minute later, and he faced her as she moved off the low stoop, hesitantly. In his high-heeled boots he was a foot taller and he looked down on her, the glow from the *Road to Ruin's* window touching the full, soft curves under the girl's brown outfit.

"Here we are," she said with an attempt at lightness.

"You didn't want me to be seen in there with you."

"Or you with me; Dirk is mean when he's jealous."

"Your husband?" he asked, though he knew she and Ollendorf weren't married.

"No." She didn't want to talk about Dirk; she wanted to test out Jarris. "I've never seen you around here before; do you aim to stay?"

"I don't know. I had a riding job in the Panhandle—but it petered out, so I'm hunting for another."

"My name's Louise Lees." She looked up at him, waiting for him to react, perhaps inviting him to tell her something more about himself.

"Marty Jarris," he said. He kept the right amount of humility in his voice, but made sure she would believe he admired her. "This isn't a very good place to talk, ma'am—not if you're afraid of this Dirk hombre."

"Who said I was afraid?" But she walked alongside him across the yard to the carriage shed.

There were several vehicles in there, as Jarris had noticed that afternoon, and he gave her a hand as she climbed into a buggy, its shafts caught up in leather loops suspended from the rafters.

He took off his Stetson and hung it on the whip socket, and getting in, sat beside her and put his arm around her. At this she began to tremble, and he thought she was crying—although she didn't make any noise about it.

MARTY JARRIS was disturbed, for he hadn't expected tears; but he didn't lose sight of his objective. "Why don't you tell me about it?" he asked.

That's what she wanted, to talk. The picture grew clearer to Jarris as she spoke, in a nervous, hurried way. Her father, Lewis Lees, had the Double L himself, until he had been thrown by a mustang and kicked in the head. Since then—a year ago—Lees had been a helpless invalid, nursed by Louise and by his sister, Aunt Emmy Lees, who lived with them. Meanwhile, evidently through a process of survival of the toughest, Dirk Ollendorf had become top-dog around the ranch.

Jarris made a hurried calculation. The Red River ranchers had decided the rustling had been going on for eight or nine months; that would just about have given Ollendorf enough time to get set and begin operations. So far, this was only suspicion; but it was certainly worth checking.

He waited until she ran down. She was beginning to worry about what he would think of her, and she said, "You haven't told me anything about yourself, Marty."

"There isn't much to tell; only what I said. I'm on the loose, hunting a riding job." He waited, hoping she would suggest it herself but she didn't.

Dirk was on her mind. "I don't want to marry him," she said, as though Jarris were trying to persuade her. "But I don't know what possessed me to come out here with you." She made a move as though to leave, but Jarris caught her wrist. "Take it easy; if you think I'm afraid of this Dirk, you got another think coming."

"You wouldn't have just Dirk to face. He fired the men my father trusted and handpicked his riders." He heard her gasp and could feel her stiffen. "There he is! He'll kill you."

"Be quiet," he ordered. "Stay where you are; he can't see us unless he comes right up to the buggy."

Blue Jowls stood under the light of the back stoop. He glanced around and, keeping close to the wall, moved several steps and stopped.

Again the back door opened and another man stepped out, pausing as Ollendorf had. He was a slim cowboy, with a flat-topped Nebraska Hat on his young head. As he turned his face to the light, Jarris jumped violently. *The fool, the poor young fool!* he thought. He started to draw the Colt from his shoulder-holster, but it was too late; he couldn't stop what was happening.

Two dark shadows lunged and Nebraska Hat took a step back, trying to pull his side gun. Stabbing flashes sheeted from opposing pistols as Ollendorf and his two friends threw metal into the cowboy, who sagged and fell in the dust.

Jarris clapped his hand over Louise's mouth to stifle her scream.

2

OLLENDORF got very busy. He jumped in, stooped and picked up the victim's revolver. Pointing it skyward, he pulled the trigger; after discharging the weapon, he dropped it at the cowboy's side.

"Keep quiet!" whispered Jarris fiercely, irritated as Louise fought against his strong hands.

She quit struggling but she was trembling violently at what she had just witnessed. A crowd began to collect behind the *Road To Ruin*, blocking Jarris's view as they stood around, staring at the body. Soon an elderly man with a spade beard came along and pushing through, took over.

"Marshal Anson," breathed Louise. Her teeth began to chatter.

They caught snatches of talk: "Tried to hold me up," insisted Ollendorf; "I only protected myself, Anson."

"That's right," shouted one of Dirk's aides. "I saw it all; it was self-defense."

At the officer's order a couple of citizens seized Nebraska Hat by the ankles and wrists, and carried the remains inside. Ollendorf and his witnesses, trailed by the morbidly curious, went around the saloon with the marshal.

"I better get back while I have the chance," said Louise. She tried to pull herself together.

"Wait a bit. Ollendorf will be over at the marshal's office for a while."

The shooting had changed his suspicion to certainty. Jarris was chagrined at failing to save the cowboy; but there had been no warning. He had a quality of being able to shrug off vain regrets and accept the inevitable. Jarris had met Nebraska Hat at the Z Bar, one of the Red River ranches. The boy had been a saddle-mate and crony of the line-rider killed by the rustlers, and Jarris recalled how upset he had been at loss of his friend. He had learned of Jarris's theory as to where the thieves came from, and had begged Jarris to take him along, so he might avenge his comrade. Jarris had refused; it would have been far too dangerous to have an untrained youth, honing for vengeance, tagging him. It would probably have meant Jarris' death, just as it had spelled it for Nebraska Hat, who had jumped home base and come over to Silverton on his own hook...

Ollendorf's reaction told Jarris a lot. It told him that his theory was right and that the Double L was involved. Ollendorf must be connected with the

rustlers, even if he wasn't running the show himself. Certainly he was on the prod, watching for pursuers.

"Where's your ranch exactly?" he asked the girl.

"No," she said firmly; "you'd have no chance out there."

"If you want to make a ranch pay," he drawled, "you have to run it yourself. Maybe Ollendorf is robbing you. Killing a man in cold blood didn't feaze him, so why should a little cheating?" If she had a word of defense to say for Ollendorf, Jarris knew he wouldn't trust her another jump. He was moving cautiously, testing each step.

"I don't understand the business end." She seemed crushed. The emotion had burned her out; a woman could stand just so much of that before shock numbed her.

He realized she must have been under repressed strain for a long time. A wild hope had impelled her to talk to Jarris. Perhaps she had sensed his inner strength.

"Pull yourself together and think up a good story to explain me showing up out there."

SHE DIDN'T think there was any, but as he pressed her she came up with a tentative idea that struck Jarris as plausible. "I had an aunt named Susan," she told him; "I never saw her, but she was father's and Aunt Emmy's younger sister. She ran away with a drummer when she was only sixteen. I've always heard them talking about it and wondering why she did it. The man was married and later deserted her. She had a son, Robert Tillman, but we've never laid eyes on him; Susan died in Oregon years ago, and her son would be around twenty-five now."

"I ought to pass for that. 'Robert Tillman, Susan Lees' son. She died in Oregon.'" He repeated it. "I won't forget it. Keep a stiff upper lip, now; I'll make a stab at it. I'll be there in the morning."

"The ranch lies upriver about six miles; you can't miss it."

"Watch for me. How about Aunt Emmy? Will she swallow it?"

"I think so. She believes in everybody, even in Dirk." With a feminine bent for intrigue she was entering into the game. "I have an old picture of Susan, taken just before she ran away. I'll cut in into a different shape and you can show it and say it's your mother."

"All right; I'll be there."

He helped her down and waited in the shadow while she hurried back to the saloon. As she reached the stoop, one of Dirk Ollendorf's aides came around the building, leading a saddled horse, and glimpsed at the girl as she went in the door. But he would probably conclude she was returning from a visit to one of the privies behind the stable.

A hand on the buggy mudguard, Jarris watched as the waddy passed between the carriage shed and the stable. There was a dark shed off to one side, and the man put the mustang in there, closed the door and went off the way he had come.

When the coast was clear, Jarris flitted to the shed and went inside. He could hear the horse move and breath and reached out with a soothing hand. With the door pulled to, he struck a match, cupping it in his hand. One look was enough; he could read the Z Bar brand and a sick feeling hit the pit of his stomach. The waddy hadn't known any better than to ride into Silverton on a mustang obviously belonging to one of the Red River ranches raided by the rustlers. On the watch, one of Ollendorf's men had seen the animal at the rail in front of the *Road to Ruin*, identified the rider and informed Ollendorf.

He left the horse in there and went off, thinking it over; he decided they had hidden the victim's mount so as to delay indentification of the cowboy.

His own brown gelding, Tony, with

an obscure brand, was in the corral at the town livery-stable, and unlikely to attract any particular attention. Jarris picked his horses with as much care for their looks as he had for his own. He dressed inconspicuously—not too well, not too poorly. The Colt .45 in his side case was an ordinary rider's weapon. It was a decoy for an antagonist to watch; his pet hand-gun was in a special shoulder-holster, hidden under his shirt.

Half an hour later Dirk Ollendorf and Louise Lees, with five men trailing them, rode out of Silverton and took to the river road. Jarris watched them over the rise in the spotty moonlight, and then went to turn in at the livery stable.

IN THE MORNING, he washed up and ate breakfast at the Texas Lunch. Silverton was ugly and raw in the fresh light, defacing the bank of the pretty river. There was the usual plaza, and stores, the to-be-expected lineup of frame structures grouped around the commons. The only attempt at civic beautification was a cast-iron watering-trough on the east edge of the plaza. Besides the *Road to Ruin*, there were other smaller saloons and honkytonks. In his unending travels Jarris had seen a hundred towns like it; such a place catered to the needs of the ranches in this vast hinterland. A railroad spur ended at the settlement, the outgoing freight chiefly cattle, with supplies coming in.

He smoked a cigaret and went to get Tony, saddling the horse himself. A small pack rode at the cantle and he had more gear in his saddlebags. A carbine in a leather case was attached to the hull. Paying his bill, he mounted and started eastward from the town just as a matter of ordinary precaution—the Double L lay to the north. Soon he reached a timber-belt behind which he could move; after a while he stopped and changed his gray shirt for a brown one. This, with a different tilt to his Stetson, should be enough in case Ollendorf had noticed him at all the night before in the dance hall. Jarris doubted that Ollendorf had; as a rule he could tell when a man was alerted. Of course in his business there was always the chance that a former enemy, released after serving time, might recognize the range investigator who had captured him and sent him to prison. That was a gnawing worry, but Jarris calculated on it; if he saw such a person first, he knew what do to about it.

He took his time, studying the contours of the range. Bunches of cattle showed as they grazed on the fine grass or stood in the shallows along the river. Westward, beyond the extensive pastures, the land rose in breathtaking sweeps, the slopes of the mountains covered with dark forests of yellow pine, broken by stands of lighter-leafed trees, maple and oak, hickory and other hardwoods. Large areas of the northeast quadrant of Texas were clothed in this mantle. The Double L seemed to have been fitted into the picture, with natural or man-made clearings—permitting enough grass to grow to support a certain number of cows. As Jarris rode, he realized that the river was wide and deep; but he thought it came from the west, rising in the heights and flowing through the ravine, the watergap he could see between the ridges. In the sky showed two smoke-plumes; one probably, came from the Double L chimney—the second, fainter one, off toward the gap.

His methodical mind mapped the terrain. And, at last, he sighted buildings across the river, with a wooden bridge leading to the ranch. He had dawdled en route, purposely, expecting that at least some of Ollendorf's men would be out, so that if anything went sour he would not have to contend with too many hostile guns.

Above high-water mark was the long, low house, built of native timber. To the rear stood the bunkhouse,

stables and cribs, corrals with mustangs cavorting in them.

He smoothed out his expression and practiced a disarming grin that showed his even white teeth. He was supposed to be a happy-go-lucky cowboy, Bob Tillman, coming to visit long-lost relatives.

IT WAS NEARLY ten o'clock as he crossed the wooden bridge, its sides protected by long railings, and moved up the slope toward the ranch. He looked easy in his seat, not at all alert; he was whistling a bit, his hat pushed back.

Sunlight bathed the yard. The place had a homey, peaceful look. A well-run spread ought to have its punchers out and working long before this hour, but as Jarris came in, he counted half a dozen cowboys hanging around. He didn't see Ollendorf in the bunch, but somebody gave a whistle; and as Jarris pulled up by the house, the burly foreman hurried out.

The dark, startled eyes ran over Jarris, over his horse and gear, and came back to fix his smiling face. Ollendorf had been in such a rush he had left his hat inside, and his black hair was crisply virile on his bull head; through the V of his shirt, Jarris could see the thick mat of monkey growth. His bared forearms were as muscled as a blacksmith's and he looked burlier than ever, with beard-stubble sticking from his bluish jowls.

"Morning, sir," said Jarris brightly. "Is this Mister Lees' Double L? They told me in town how to find her."

Ollendorf looked worried, just as Jarris suspected. He was on the watch for trackers sent by the Z Bar and other ranches the thieves had been raiding. It wouldn't take more than a flicker for Ollendorf to start shooting; and his men were ready, too. Amateur thieves were often more dangerous than professionals, for they panicked more easily and were prone to fire without warning.

3

JARRIS was sure he could get Ollendorf before Dirk could bring his walnut-stocked Colt into play, but there were the others behind him. He couldn't reach cover beyond the buildings before they would riddle him, and his quick plan was to throw himself off his horse and dive into the house. After that he would think about what to do next, if it came down to it.

"I ain't taking on any riders, sonny," drawled Dirk.

Close to, Jarris saw that the smoldering eyes were lively and intelligent.

The atmosphere was thick enough to slice. "Oh, I'm not hunting a job, mister; my handle is Bob Tillman and I'm lately from Oregon. I'm Mister Lees' nephew, and I'd sure like to see him. Not that I ever did before." Jarris tried not to sound too bright.

A white curtain stirred at a window, and Jarris had a brief glimpse of Louise's face. She must have been watching for him.

The claim of relationship diverted Ollendorf, as Jarris had expected it would. "Never heard of you," said the foreman. "And you wouldn't want to see Mister Lees."

Jarris' tone was hurt rather than angry as he said, "Well, I would. He's my only uncle, mister; he ain't up and died, has he?"

Ollendorf shrugged. "He's worse than dead, boy. The sight of him would make you puke."

"You don't say!" Jarris was properly shocked. He raised his hand very carefully, to yank at the tag attached to the string of his tobacco pouch, pulling out the sack and starting to fix a smoke for himself. "That's mighty sad, mighty sad! I come a long way just to see him, too. My

mother was his sister Susan and she used to tell me all about my Uncle Lew and my Aunt Emmy. I always allowed I'd drop in on 'em if I ever got down Texas way."

Four of the boys had risen and sauntered closer to listen. Jarris didn't particularly study them, but he noted that they were heavily armed, wearing leather or whipcord pants, spurred boots and Stetsons. At superficial inspection it could be hard to tell the difference between cowboy and outlaw, but an expert could identify little signs —in eyes and bearing, the aspect of weapons and gear.

"Tough luck you can't see your uncle," said Dirk. "You might as well turn that nag, and—"

Louise Lees, in a blue dress, hurried from the open door. She was ahead of a stout, pink-faced woman of fifty—who ought to be Aunt Emmy, Jarris decided. The girl raised her voice as she spoke to her aunt. "Aunt Emmy! He says he's Susan's son!"

Ollendorf glanced over his shoulder and sniffed heavily. He looked irritated, but stepped aside to avoid the rush.

"Well, are you Susan's little boy?" Aunt Emmy cried shrilly. "Light and set, right this instant so I can hug you."

Smiling, Jarris stepped down, and Aunt Emmy threw her fat, warm arms around his neck and hugged him with all her might.

"Yes, ma'am, I reckon you're Aunt Emmy. Ma told me all about you; she was always talking of you and Uncle Lew."

"You'll have to speak louder, dear," said Aunt Emmy. "I'm a mite hard of hearing."

Jarris repeated what he had said in a voice that echoed across the river valley. Aunt Emmy's cowlike brown eyes filled with tears and she kept hugging him and kissing him. "My little Robert, my sister's baby! You got Sue's mouth and eyes, sure enough. Oh, how happy I am. Come in, come in, right now and tell me all about her. I know she's dead, rest her soul, but I want to hear all there is."

A derisive grin showed on Ollendorf's face, and Aunt Emmy's effusive words made the men snicker, too. Any man would have looked like a fool at being so mothered in front of his peers, but Jarris was delighted because he could tell the enemy was disarmed.

Aunt Emmy relaxed her hold on Jarris' neck. "This is your sweet little cousin Louise, Uncle Lew's only baby," she yelled. "Can't you spare a kiss for your cousin, honey?"

THE GIRL was smiling widely and her cheeks were pink. Jarris was astonished at her ability to act her part. "I'm so glad you've come to see us, Cousin Bob." She came close to him and gave him a sisterly peck on the cheek as her hand gripped his.

Something was pushed into Jarris' palm and he closed on it as Louise withdrew her hand. He reached in his pocket and apparently brought forth a small, round-cut photograph of a sweet-faced woman with a high lace collar. "I carry ma's picture wherever I go, Aunt Emmy," he said, showing it to her.

Tears streamed down Aunt Emmy's florid cheeks. "Come in, come in, she said. "You just got to stay here with us, Robert dear. I'll bet you're piqued for a meal, too; I'll shake up something this instant."

Ollendorf made no objection as Aunt Emmy practically dragged Jarris into the spacious kitchen, the elder woman's special domain. She shoved him into a seat at the table and set about preparing a meal, prattling away—but seldom waiting for an

answer. Ollendorf followed them inside and sprawled in a chair facing the visitor while Louise hovered around, helping her aunt. The foreman picked up a cold cigar butt from a dish, lighted it and fixedly watched Jarris.

"You've come a long way," said Ollendorf.

"Right. Last season I worked for the Ex-ee over in the Panhandle; then I started drifting down the river." Jarris knew exactly what he was talking about, for he had been in the far west section of Texas on another job, before he had undertaken to track the rustlers for the Z Bar and other ranches. An expert, such as the manager, could read a great deal by studying a man's horse and gear.

Aunt Emmy had unequivocably accepted the imposter. As far as Ollendorf went, the cut-out picture may have helped. As Jarris had foreseen, this approach had turned Dirk's guard; but the role must be maintained, and he dare not let himself be caught off-slant.

The food Aunt Emmy "shook up" was delicious; but with Ollendorf puffing at his cigar, dark eyes lazily half-lidded as he listened and watched, Jarris had to consider every word he uttered. When Louise called him "Cousin Bob" he muffed it the first time and was slow turning to reply. Even such a little slip could prove fatal; it might reawaken Ollendorf's suspicion. Aunt Emmy asked countless questions, and it was an ordeal for Jarris, with the manager just across the board.

Jarris was glad when he had finished eating, for then Aunt Emmy cried, "Come along, now, Bob dear, and I'll show you your room. You make yourself right to home and stay as long as you can. Dirk will give you a job if you want one—won't you, Dirk?"

Ollendorf frowned and didn't reply, immediately; the prospect didn't seem to please him very much. "Maybe he's got a job," he said. "Things are slow here and I had to let some men go."

Aunt Emmy hadn't bothered to listen to Ollendorf's answer; she was starting for the connecting door into the east section of the long house, divided by a dog-run in the center. Jarris trailed her, and Louise brought up the rear, Dirk staying where he was. They passed a closed door and Jarris glanced at it, startled but not showing it. A low, inhuman growling came from behind the door, and Louise said in a loud voice, so her aunt could hear, "I'll go, Aunt Emmy."

She stood, waiting at the closed door, until Jarris had gone past. He glanced over his shoulder and she shook her head at him and pointed after her aunt, meaning he was to follow.

AUNT EMMY led him through the dog-run, open at one side. Saddles, gear and several hound dogs, chained to small kennels, occupied the space between the two wings. Jarris overtook the woman after she had entered the other wing. "What's wrong with Uncle Lew, anyway?" he asked, voice raised so she could hear.

She sadly shook her head. "Poor brother; his head's hurt and he's mighty poorly."

"Can't he see anybody?"

"It's better not—here's your room. The bed's fresh made up just like I knew you were coming! You fetch in your things and settle down." She hugged him and gave him a hearty, wet kiss. "I ain't been so happy in a month of Sundays. There's a Bible for you, and make sure you crack it once in a while; it won't do you a bit of harm."

"Yes, ma'am."

When she had gone, Jarris rolled a smoke and sat down to relax. Then he heard Louise's light, quick step and she came in, smiling up at him. "We fooled him," she said in a low voice.

"I hope so." He had risen as she entered and he watched her. There were deep shadows under her eyes and a pallor in her cheeks. "You're plumb wore out; were you worried over this?"

She shook her head impatiently. "It's nothing. Aunt and I take turns nursing dad, and it was mine last night after I got home. He was restless."

"What's the matter with him?"

"I told you. He was kicked in the head." She didn't want to discuss it.

"So Dirk wants to marry you," he said bluntly.

"Well, he's been asking me, lately —but I don't think he really wants to; he's had a woman in town for a long time."

"Yeah? What's her name?"

"Ruth Young. She lives in a house across from the *Road to Ruin*. She's very pretty and more Dirk's type."

A cold finger touched Jarris's brain. He had been playing a careful game with Louise Lees in order to carry out his mission; now he wondered, from what she had just said, if she also were dissembling. The contemptuous note in her voice as she spoke of the other woman could mean jealousy—possibly a lovers' quarrel between Ollendorf and the ranch-girl. She might have hoped to use Jarris as a goad to reawaken Dirk's affections, or crystallize them. He didn't know Louise well enough yet to be entirely sure of her. He had seen the act she had put on in the kitchen for Ollendorf, and it had been a consummate performance. If Dirk capitulated there might be a clinch—very touching for the participants, but fatal to Jarris. Personally, he couldn't see how a girl could go for such a prospect as the hairy, bulldog-jawed manager—but he was aware that many fine women preferred coarse males. And while they might be easily shocked, as Louise had been when Ollendorf had shot down the Z Bar cowboy, they were also very quick to condone lawless deeds committed by a relative—particularly a husband or lover.

So far he hadn't told her the game and he decided he wouldn't until he had checked further on her relations with Dirk. She believed it to be attraction for herself that had brought Jarris to the ranch.

Suddenly, in a loud, bright sisterly voice she said, "Let me know if you want anything else, Cousin Bob." She turned and went out.

The sudden change surprised Jarris for only a breath; he gathered what it might be, heard her say, "Oh, he's in his room, Dirk."

Ollendorf had come along very quietly. He hulked in the low doorway, practically filling it. His teeth were bared as he gripped the cigar-stub, and and he was carrying Jarris's saddlebags and cantle-roll. "Here's your gear, Bob; I had one of the boys unsaddle for you."

JARRIS could see that the pack was loose, unrolled and then hastily made up again. One of the saddlebag straps wasn't pushed through the loop. They had searched his stuff as a matter of precaution; but as Jarris never carried anything that might betray him, either in his bags or in his pockets, that part didn't worry him. "Gracias," he said, with proper gratitude.

Dirk watched as he unpacked his few belongings. "Let's step out and see how the day holds," suggested Jarris. "I never was much of a one for sticking inside."

Ollendorf nodded and followed him through the dog-run, where the effusive hounds whined and wriggled their brownish-black bodies, jumping as they sought to lick the hands of the passing men. They skirted the other wing and reached the main yard, where some of the punchers made a pretense of working—mending saddles or harness as they chatted together. Staccato explosions came from the other side of a barn; a couple of men were banging away at tin cans, with their pistols, making the rusty containers jump with every shot. Target-practice was a requisite with such fellows. Those nearby stopped their talk and stared as Ollendorf and the visitor came over.

"What can I do to give a hand, Dirk?" asked Jarris.

"That stable needs cleaning, Cousin Bob." Ollendorf seemed slightly sar-

castic, but it was probably just his idea of humor, Jarris decided.

Jarris went at it with a pitchfork. The stable hadn't been seen for some time, and the task was an Augean one. Around noon, several more Double L riders pulled in, dismounting and unsaddling. Jarris saw them through a stall window. They were led by a slight, sallow-faced man, and Ollendorf sang out to him. "Hey, Blackie!"

Blackie had a Mexican sombrero cocked on his greasy-haired head, perhaps to add a little height to his figure. He lost more inches because of badly-bowed legs, his gait comical as he rolled over to hear what Dirk had to say. Ollendorf spoke to him in a tone too low for Jarris to overhear, and Blackie glanced at the stable and nodded.

Jarris was too shrewd an operator to hurry things. He knew that Ollendorf had just warned Blackie about the newcomer, "Cousin Bob." He must familiarize himself with the local surroundings, and get set before he took any open action. By seizing his chance with Louise Lees, he had been placed in an excellent position for observation—a spot he could never have hoped to reach on his own. Ollendorf ran a closed corporation and was on the prod, watching for trouble. Jarris' forte was obtaining legal evidence; suspicion never held up in a court of law, and an unconvicted killer and bandit—turned loose because of sloppy investigative work—was much more dangerous than an unaccused one. And there were angles in this which needed clarifying.

Louise Lees came to the kitchen door, a blue apron protecting her dress. She had a long iron cooking-spoon in her hand and used it to hit a brass bell suspended from a bracket outside the doorway. The men stopped what they were doing and trooped over, quickly; Jarris hastily cleaned up and was the last one inside at the long table. Aunt Emmy and the girl served a heavy hot meal, and afterwards everybody found a shady spot for a siesta....

LATER IN the afternoon, Jarris resumed his task in the big stable. He had a trained memory for faces and soon learned the names of many of Dirk's followers.

When dark came, the oil lamps were lighted. Ollendorf had a small "office" adjoining the living room. Dirk spent an hour in there, poring over a couple of ledgers. The cowboys were in the bunkhouse, while Jarris sat with Aunt Emmy and Louise, both women busily sewing. Twice the humming growl sent the girl off toward her father's quarters.

Everybody turned in early. Ollendorf went out to the bunkhouse, but Jarris—as an honored relative—had a room in the other wing of the ranch house. He blew out the candle Aunt Emmy had given him and, with his boots and gunbelt off, lay down on the bunk. For a time he dozed, but then awakened; vague sounds came from the household, the creak of floorboards as somebody lightly stepped along the hall, the careful opening and shutting of a latched door. From outside came more noises, the piping of frogs down by the river, the far-off lowing of cattle.

After while, Jarris rose and, in his bare feet, went to the open window. He could see the shape of the long bunkhouse in the silver moonlight. A small ruby glow came up, then diminished; it was a cigaret, drawn on by a man leaning against the log wall. It might be Ollendorf, on guard, or one of Dirk's men; Jarris returned, to his couch.

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After breakfast next morning, Jarris pitched in and finished the stable. Dirk and most of his men had ridden out, moving southwest across the main Double L range. Blackie and a couple of hands were around the yard.

Jarris was eager to check over the immediate geography, for more than one reason; he must know the lay of the land, if only for escape purposes. Upriver, the forests soon began hiding the hills rising west and northwest, the rugged section through which the stream approached the lower range.

About three o'clock he took his saddle off the corral rail. Blackie mooched over. "Where you going, Cousin?" asked the little man, who acted as Dirk's segundo.

"Thought I'd exercise my horse, Blackie. Okay?"

Blackie scratched his head. "All right," he said.

Blackie watched as he saddled Tony, mounted, and started slowly up the trail along the west bank. When the trees and rises hid him from the ranch, he picked up speed, moving through a narrow horse-track that skirted the stream. It ran full and deep here. As he had decided, the river made a turn westward farther up the line, the land rising in magnificent, forested heights. The banks grew steeper, confining the flow of the water. The aromatic odors of evergreens, yellow pine, spruce, made his nostrils flare with pleasure for Jarris was an outdoor man and loved the wilderness. He could identify other timber, maple, walnut, oak, ash and hickory, fine stands of virgin growth.

HE HAD BEEN out for an hour, when he caught the muffled roar of a waterfall; pushing on, expecting to reach it at any minute, Jarris found it farther away than he had estimated. At last the constricted trail broke into a small natural clearing overlooking the ravine. Here was a high bluff, with giant red-rock steps dropping to the dark waters of the pool below the falls. Jarris dismounted and dropped Tony's rein, then walked out on the crown ledge for a better view.

The flow was powerful and swept over the lip with noisy abandon, landing well out in the lower basin, white water cascading and whirlpooling as it crashed. He could feel the cool breath of the moving fluid while now and again droplets of spray hit his cheek. Fishing birds waited in the shallows on the other side, picking up minnows or insects forced to the surface by the strong current. On both sides grew the forests, crowding for roothold.

The natural beauty of it gripped him. The loud sounds, echoing from the rocky walls, filled his ears and he could sense the vibration through his boot soles. "Reach, damn you!"

The harsh command, louder then, but accompanied by the booming of the falls, pierced his consciousness like a knife-stab. The violent fury in the challenge shocked Jarris more than the confused surprise. He carefully raised his hands to his hat-brim; only an idiot, or inexperienced tyro, would have disobeyed under the circumstances. There was a brief lull, during which Nature's sounds went on, blandly oblivious to the threat of death.

Then the deep voice began cursing his heart and soul with a raucous, unreasoned anger. Jarris had heard many types of profane abuse and thought he knew all the words, but whoever it was made up new ones as he went along. It wasn't Dirk Ollendorf, he could tell by the voice, but it might be one of his men.

"Now swing around and let's see your ugly face!"

Jarris turned slowly, keeping his hands up. At the edge of the woods stood a man as tall as Jarris, and as heavy through the body as Ollendorf. A double-barreled shotgun was at his hip, one hand at the guard and a finger on a trigger, while the other directed the staring black muzzles at Jarris.

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JARRIS had never seen the man before, so was at a loss as to what he should say to save his life. The Newcomer was dirty and bearded, his crisp black hair larded with gray, a very wide mouth spewing the torrent of abuse. He seemed to be lashing himself to the kill, but Jarris held a faint hope; if the other had wished, he could have blasted Jarris without warning. The challenge showed that, at least, he had some hesitation about pulling trigger.

Jarris knew he had made an error in permitting anyone to come up behind him, especially as the roar of the falls drowned out sounds of approach. It was the type of a mistake a man usually made just once—he never got a second chance. But he hid his chagrin as well as he did his natural fear; his face was calm. "What's wrong, mister?"

"You sneakin' eyeballer, I got you; I'm going to blow your guts all over that rock."

An eyeballer was a spy. Was the big man one of Ollendorf's followers? They were all on the prod, ready to go off half-cocked. Jarris felt he had to chance it, so he said, "I'm a friend of Dirk's."

The shotgun never wavered. "You lie like hell. You wouldn't be up here snoopin' alone if you was. I never saw you or your horse before, either; Dirk ain't taking on any new riders."

As long as he could keep the big-mouthed stranger talking, Jarris stayed alive. He was ready to lunge, but the other knew too much; he wouldn't come closer and when Jarris took a tentative step toward him, he scowled and snapped, "Hold where you be!"

"You're making a bad mistake," argued Jarris earnestly. "I'm no eyeballer; I'm Mister Lees' nephew come to visit the folks. Ask Dirk, ask Aunt Emmy and Cousin Lou."

There was an untamed savagery about the big man. A gunning wouldn't bother him any, and he was jumpy—just the way Ollendorf was. Jarris knew they were all afraid of pursuit, of what they had done; in order to protect themselves from the consequences they would kill, as Dirk had already done.

Jarris's chance came a breath later. The shotgunner gave a hasty glance over his shoulder, and Jarris threw himself in as the weapon diverged for an instant.

"O'Brien—no!" The shrill scream rang in the forest aisles.

Jarris was too busy to check his rush. The shotgun belched, but the buck missed him by two inches, whooshing past his left shoulder and driving through the air, plugging into the other bank across the river. His trained hand knocked the gun farther aside and then he clinched, his weight behind the shoulder hitting his opponent's stomach. O'Brien doubled up and fell, with Jarris bringing up his knee as he let himself go, landing on top of the big man.

He wrenched the shotgun from the twisted fingers, and sought to disentangle himself from the heap, but O'Brien reached for him and held him with a bear-hug. Jarris began jabbing, knowing he had to free himself quickly; O'Brien was stronger, and Jarris had to equalize it either by catch-as-catch-can tricks, or with a pointed gun. It was impossible for him to draw his shoulder-weapon, and the shotgun was too long to bring into play at close quarters; he dropped it so he could use both hands. O'Brien had caught his wind, and was using his fists and knees to advantage. Jarris's head banged the rock and he saw stars but he could take punishment.

Louise Lees, jumping off a palomino, rushed in, yelling at them. "Stop it! Stop it! O'Brien he's a friend of ours! Martin, don't hurt him." In the

excitement she had called Jarris by his right name, forgetting the "Cousin Bob." A cool thinker even in a pinch, Jarris noticed the mistake and it was a question of whether O'Brien would.

"I'll lay off if you will, mister," gasped Jarris.

Louise was beside them, jumping up and down; she bent over, trying to separate them as she might two fighting dogs. "Quit it, both of you," she shouted.

The big Irishman stopped and Jarris was only too glad to disengage himself. He pushed to his feet, puffing for wind; he had a long, bloody scratch down one bronzed cheek and O'Brien's left eye was puffing shut.

O'BRIEN sat up. He began to grin, crookedly but in a good humor, his mood changing instantly. "Aw, why did you want to spoil a good scrap?" he said to the girl, in a jovial voice. "We were just gettin' into the thick of it."

"He's—he's my cousin, O'Brien," she said. Now she remembered and said, "His name's Bob Tillman. You must have heard my aunt and father speak of their sister Susan. This is her son, and he came to visit us." She frowned on O'Brien as she saw she had control of the situation. "What if you'd killed him?"

If O'Brien noticed the switch in first names he didn't say anything about it. He looked shamefaced and tried to grin off his error. He rose and thrust a huge hand toward Jarris, crying, "Put 'er there, son; sorry I went for you. Hair in the butter, it's lucky I didn't pull trigger and find out later who you were."

"That's what I said," snapped Louise. "What's got into you? You shouldn't gun a man because you don't happen to know who he is. Does everybody have to wear a sign telling who he is, so you won't put buckshot into him?"

"Shucks, there's a passel of outlaws hide out in these forests, Miss Lou; I figured he was one. We got to take care of ourselves, don't we? But it turned out fine." O'Brien's mood had switched and he was jovial, the best of friends. "Come on up to the shack and we'll have a little drink," he suggested.

"No. We'll be late for supper and Aunt Emmy's cooking dumplings; come on, Bob." She flashed another cold look at O'Brien and turned toward her palomino.

"How's your dad?" called O'Brien after her.

"No better, no worse."

"Ah, it's a crying shame," said O'Brien shaking his head unhappily.

"See you again, O'Brien," said Jarris.

"Any told time," nodded the other, picking up the shotgun. Back in the woods stood the black mustang belonging to O'Brien.

Jarris, relieved at getting out of the scrape, trailed after Louise. They mounted and rode off and soon the path grew wide enough so he could push Tony up beside her mare.

She seemed out of sorts. "I was afraid you'd run into trouble and that's why I came after you; Blackie will tell Dirk.

"What of it? Can't a couple of cousins take a ride together?"

"I'm not sure what Dirk thinks."

"Has he said anything?"

"No. He can't be too leery yet, or you wouldn't be here."

"Who's this O'Brien?"

"A squatter, really. He's lived up this way for years, with his Mexican wife—they have a daughter, about fifteen, named Christine. Father owns all this land. He has legal title to it and put every cent he could lay his hands on into buying more sections. Dad could have had O'Brien put off but he never did,"

"Is O'Brien grateful?"

"I suppose so. He always loved father; he helps during roundup, whenever we need an extra hand."

"How's he live?"

"He hunts a lot and whenever he wants beef he's welcome to kill one of our cows. He drinks like a fish."

"Evidently he's a pard of Dirk's?"

"They do split the bottle together sometimes. And since my father was hurt, O'Brien has looked more to Dirk."

JARRIS thought this over. The rustlers could scarcely have come through here without O'Brien being aware of it. His chief idea was to pin down the thieves for his Red River clients, though the woman believed he had come out solely to help her; now she thought this up, saying, "This is a chance for us to talk. How can you find out if Dirk's cheating us?"

"I'll want to look at the ledgers, and check the entries against shipping records and what I can estimate is still on your range."

"Well, will you?"

"I'll try; I'll do anything you say."

She gave him a sharp look, as though attempting to gage him. She had more strength than he had given her credit for, when he had caught her in that weak moment at Silverton. "There's something going on, something different," she said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know, exactly; I just feel it. I told you Dirk has suddenly started begging me to marry him."

"Any man would be a fool who didn't."

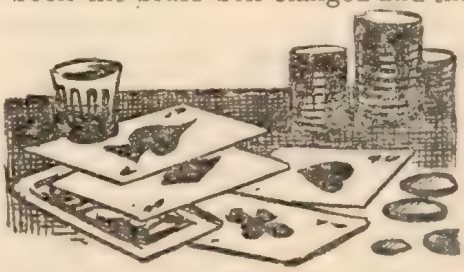
It didn't ring quite true. Jarris had never gone in much for sentiment and perhaps the girl, upset as she was, wasn't in the mood—or she may have sensed something false in the way he tried to make love. She rode on, and in silence they cut down out of the woods and took to the open trail along the river.

"Here comes Blackie," she said, as they sighted the buildings down the line. "I'll bet Dirk's back and sent him after us."

The little segundo waved at them, over his Mexican peaked sombrero. He grinned as he came up, tobacco-stained fangs showing between his thin lips. He hadn't shaved that day and a thin stubble covered his receding chin. Jarris, looking for a soft spot, would have picked Blackie as a man who might break under pressure. Guns on, his high hat strapped to his head, Blackie looked formidable; but there were little signs a trained observer could read—too many crow's feet around the eyes, showing Blackie was a worrier. A bit of subservience in his voice, he said, "Dirk's home. He sent me after you; he was afeared Cousin Bob would get lost."

Louise Lees shrugged and pushed on, while the two men rode together. At the ranch, Ollendorf and the other hands were waiting in the yard. Jarris gave them an airy wave and went to unsaddle and turn out his horse; one of the cowboys took charge of the palomino, and the girl went into the kitchen to help her aunt.

Soon the brass bell clanged and they



trooped in. Louise came over with a platter of fried eggs and Dirk said, "I'm going to town for a while this evening. Want to ride along?"

"I better not, Dirk; Father's pretty restless."

Ollendorf didn't argue the point. He finished his meal and went out to smoke; before long, Jarris saw him saddling a Double L mustang out at the corrals. Several of his hands rode off with him toward the wooden bridge across the river.

JARRIS waited around until dark fell. Blackie, and others who had stayed at home, were in the bunkhouse. Aunt Emmy, after cleaning up the kitchen, had gone to bed, while Louise was off in another part of the house—probably with her father. Jarris scrunched out his quirly; a single oil lamp burned on the center table. He went through the corridor, and saw that Lewis Lees' bedroom door stood ajar. He made a habit of walking

quietly, because of his trade. He was curious, too, about the condition of Louise's father, and he heard the low humming growling again.

He stopped near the open door and glanced into the large bedroom. In the center stood a double bedstead, and on a table by it burned a bright lamp. Jarris saw Louise bending over the long form, draped with a blanket and sheet. She was giving her father a drink of water, or perhaps medicine, from a glass, one arm supporting his head and shoulders. Jarris had a clear view of the man's face. It was a shocking sight, the sickly yellow skin taut over jutting cheekbones and the long skull withered and misshapen on one side. As he made the peculiar growling sound, a faded mustache vibrated over lax lips. The arms and bare shoulders were wasted away. Less looked like a mummy but he wasn't; he had no control over his functions—the brain-injury resulting from the terrible kick in the head had deprived him of that, leaving him a pitiful, helpless shell.

Louise gently lowered her father and straightened up. Then she turned quickly on Jarris. He stepped into the room, seeing she was disturbed; on the other wall was a long mirror—she had seen his image in it.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to spy."

"Now you've seen him," she shrugged; "that's all there is to it."

"He can't understand what's being said?"

"No. He can't hear, and can't speak except to make that sound. It took me a long while to get accustomed to it."

"The doctors can't help him?"

"They've done what they can; they say he may hang on this way for years."

Lees had stopped growling and the tired eyes were closed. The woman nodded and Jarris stepped back; she followed him out, shutting the bedroom door after her. He could understand what a strain she must have been under all these months, and how easily Ollendorf could have taken control of the business. Pity for her touched Jarris.

"Dirk's gone off," he said; "now's my chance at the books. Will you keep watch in case Blackie snoops around while I'm at it?"

She nodded, and Jarris went back through the living room into the side office. The ledgers lay on the old desk where Ollendorf had left them, and he scooped them out, took them to the table by the lamp. By arranging a couple of newspapers around the books, Jarris could examine them while keeping them hidden from the view of someone peeking through a window.

Louise went to the kitchen from which vantage point she could watch the bunkhouse door. Half an hour later, she hurried to the connecting passage to give a low warning. "Blackie's outside." Jarris covered the ledgers with the papers and stood up, but the segundo, after a tour of the yard, went back inside.

When Jarris had finished he returned the books and went to find Louise. "How many head of cattle do you usually run?"

"I believe about four thousand."

Jarris grunted. "I need to check up more on what's on the range. From the bunches I saw today, they haven't been culled over much, but according to your records you shipped over two thousand head last season."

"Dirk says we still have money in the bank."

Jarris could guess where the extra cattle had come from; they had been run off the great Red River range beyond the forests, stolen from his clients. As far as the Double L went, Ollendorf had done too well and had sold a much greater percentage of stock than such a spread could hope for, without ruining its herds. It was obvious to Jarris that the rustlers had been using the Double L as a front so they could dispose of stolen beeves.

LOUISE was on duty that night, nursing her father. She had a couch in his bedroom where she could lie down and nap, but Lees was very

restless, and whoever was tending him had to be up and down through the dark hours. Occasionally she had to visit the kitchen for hot water or for gruel, a large kettle of which was kept on the back of the stove.

Jarris went to his room in the other wing. A small piece of wire held down the left-bar of the latch so it couldn't be moved without a racket, while he had fashioned a wooden wedge to push between the sash and guide of the single window—anyone trying to raise it from outside would have to use a lever or a great deal of force. He was a light sleeper; a man of his calling, when on duty anyway, wasn't much better off than those he trailed. He had to stay on the watch day and night.

He drifted off, and slept for several hours when he awakened with a snap. He heard dull hoofthuds in the yard and a lantern's beam moved across his window. He got up in his bare feet and stole to the window, open six inches from the bottom. Squatting back from it, he saw Dirk Ollendorf and several waddies, returned from town or wherever they had been, unsaddling out there. When they had turned their horses into a corral, they went into the bunkhouse and after a short interval the lantern was blown out.

Jarris returned to his bunk. The edge had been taken off his weariness and he had a lot to think about. A prime question was, how long would Ollendorf put up with having "cousin Bob" around the place? Jarris must figure that out to the crucial moment, or he might be trapped or shot before he could get clear.

He reached for his makin's, tobacco sack and papers, and started to fix a quirly, but then the sound of low voices stopped him. He lay there, tensely listening, but could scarcely tell where they were coming from. Rising once more, he squatted by the open window. The voices were more audible and he believed they came from the other wing. One was a man's; the other a woman's. He thought it was Louise and Ollendorf, their voices carrying through one of Lees' windows down the line—but even though the sounds were plainer, he still couldn't distinguish the words and that disturbed him. Jarris hesitated but decided he should chance it; Dirk must have some good reason for disturbing her at such a late hour.

If he went through the dog-run the hounds would be sure to raise a fuss, even if only in friendly greeting; and the house-wall his window was cut through was moonlit, so anyone looking from the bunkhouse might see him. But the latter was a better gamble than the dog-run; he loosened his wedge and raised the sash high enough to squeeze under. He kept low and soon was crouched beneath one of Lees' windows. As he had thought, it was Ollendorf and Louise; and now he could make out what they were saying.

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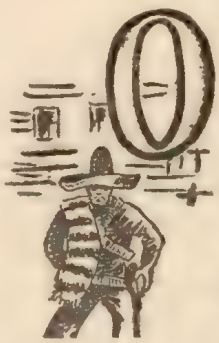


OLLENDORF complained, "You didn't used to treat me like this; you ain't even friendly any more."

"I used to think you were a friend," she parried. "Now you've started pawing me, and I don't like it. I won't marry you, so forget it; go turn in, and sleep off the liquor you had in town."

He wouldn't take no for an answer. "I ain't really drunk. Come, don't be muleheaded. You need a man to run this place and I savvy the ropes. I got a better offer, and I may take it; but if we're hitched it would be different. I'd have something to work for."

Jarris decided they'd been arguing since Ollendorf had come in. There was a pause, and he could picture her facing the manager as they fought a duel of wits. He concluded he had been wrong in suspecting that

she and Dirk had ever been more to each other than appeared on the surface.

"All right," said Dirk. "But it's hell to treat me like this, honey; maybe you'll change your mind."

"I doubt it," she said coldly.

Jarris feared she might come out with what she had seen behind the *Road to Ruin,* but she didn't. He thought Ollendorf was on the point of leaving, and turned to get back to his window. Somebody at the bunkhouse sharply hailed him,

"Hey, what you doing there?"

Jarris scuttled away. A figure from the bunkhouse started running at him, shouting the alarm. He showed against the wall and couldn't dive through his window for that would be a giveaway. Dirk stuck his head and shoulders out of Lees' room. "What in blue blazes is going on out there!" he bellowed.

"Somebody was under that window! There he goes!"

"Stop him, shoot him," ordered Ollendorf.

A colt rapped behind Jarris who hastily swung the end of the long house and ran around the other side. The dog-run was here and the hounds, roused by the ruckus, were yelping and barking. He had to think fast; he couldn't get back into his room by way of the door for he had fastened the latch on the inside. He was barefoot, and all his gear was in there; he had only a wink in which to make up his mind, and he chose a bold course.

He ducked through the end of the dog-run and then turned, catching his breath as he waited, holding the door just ajar so he could peek through the crack. A few moments later Ollendorf rushed from the other wing.

"What's the matter, Dirk?" yelled Jarris, the proper alarm and curiosity in his voice. "It's me, Bob; you need any help?" He wanted to make sure that Ollendorf wouldn't shoot him in the excitement—by mistake, anyhow. Now he opened the door and stepped into the dog-run as though he had just come from his room.

Ollendorf turned on him and replied gruffly, "It's nothing; just some fool horsethief trying to get at our mustangs."

The bunkhouse had roused and armed men were hurrying to join their leader. Blackie was outside, and the man who had seen Jarris' hunched, dark figure scurry around the far end of the house kept calling, "He come this way, Dirk, he come this way!"

"You see anybody, Tillman?" demanded Ollendorf, coming toward him. He gripped a cocked pistol, and his eyes glowed in the faint light.

"I did hear somebody run around the house," said Jarris; "after I came out in the hall I thought he hoofed it upriver."

"Blackie!" sang out Dirk. "Hustle; get some horses under you and see if you can flush anybody up the stream." Ollendorf was fuming; he was shaky, thought Jarris, as he had been all along, fearful he would be caught up with for the shooting on the Red River range. His heavy legs spread, gun in hand, Ollendorf stared out at the rolling, moonlit expanse, with straggling, black-shadowed lines marking the course of Silver River He swore, and, as his men hastily brought out mustangs and came whirling around, he said, "The cuss probably hid his horse in the river dip; there's plenty of brush over there." As his riders galloped on, Ollendorf stepped out and eagerly watched, listening hopefully for shots or yells that would tell they had sighted the quarry.

For the moment, Jarris had fooled them—but he still had to get back into his room. Then Louise came to join them in a wrap-around and slippers. Dirk answered her questions. "A horsethief, I reckon. The boys are chasing him up the line." The three stood, the girl's pale face turned toward Jarris, but she didn't say anything.

DIRK BROKE the silence. "I could do with some coffee; it don't look like we'll get much shut-eye tonight."

"I'll go fix some. I'll have it ready in ten minutes, there's hot water on the stove."

"Take your time," he said.

She went through past her father's room. Dirk eyed Jarris. "Go back to your bunk, I'll handle this." There was a note in his voice that Jarris couldn't disobey. And Jarris was anxious about getting into his room so he didn't argue. He thought that Dirk might want to be with the girl again, to press his suit.

He nodded and swung through his corridor. His door was tight; he feared Ollendorf might be checking him so he turned quickly into the small room next his own and shut that door. Listening for a moment at the crack, he heard the dog-run door open, then close softly after a brief interval.

He moved to the spare-room window. It squeaked as he eased it up and peeked out. His own was invitingly close, and all he needed was a couple of breaths in order to return as he had come. He thought that all the men had left the bunkhouse, but couldn't be certain; one or two might have stayed behind on guard. Yellow shafts of light came from Lees' windows, that was all; he had to chance it and the yard, as far as he could see, was empty. He climbed through, hastily pulled down that sash, and in a few steps reached his own.

Faintly, he caught the growling Lewis Lees made when he needed attention, a drink of water or to be moved. Then that was suddenly cut off, but Jarris thought nothing of it as he thrust his head over the low sill and snaked back into his own room.

He wished to be sure he hadn't been observed, for if one of Dirk's men had seen him slide in his window it would be embarrassing. He squatted at the side of the opening for a time, sure that if a cowboy had been spying the man would step over to report to Ollendorf.

Just as he decided all was well, a figure loomed up in his range of vision. But then he realized that whoever it was hadn't come from the bunkhouse, but seemed to have materialized from thin air on the house wall. Jarris nearly lost his balance as he withdrew deeper into the shadow of his room, and almost missed getting a good look at the man who hurried, silently, past the brief window gap. But he was sure it was Dirk. Ollendorf glanced over his shoulder and his eyes reflected the moonlight.

Curious, Jarris crawled over so he could watch the broad, stooped form as Dirk disappeared around the far end of the wing. "Now what was he up to?" muttered Jarris.

He kept listening, and, after a minute heard the hounds in the dog-run increase their whining and joyful yelps as they did when anyone they knew hove in sight. He caught the scent of fresh boiling coffee from the kitchen; then he tensed as the door to his wing again was opened. He heard a heavy tread in the hall. Getting back into his bunk he lay on his back. He had his shoulder-gun under his shirt and his decoy Colt by his pillow.

"Say, Bob, you still awake?" called Dirk.

"Yeah."

"Come have coffee with us."

"I'll be there." Jarris pulled on his boots; the manager's change of tune puzzled him, but he didn't feel he could refuse the invitation. He freed his latch and stepped forth. Ollendorf was at the dog-run exit, and beckoned him to come on.

Jarris trailed him. They passed Lewis Lees' bedroom, its door shut, and went on into the kitchen where Louise had just lifted the coffee-pot from the stove. She nodded to Jarris, but didn't seem surprised to see him; she only reached for another cup and put it on the table.

OLLENDORF rubbed his hands. "This is what I need," he said. "Help yourself, Cousin Bob." He seemed unusually jovial.

Louise sat between them and drank her coffee. She said, "I'll take dad a cup. He sure enjoys it. I can tell from the way he acts when I give him some; he always did love coffee."

Jarris kept sipping the hot fluid, sweetened with molasses, and didn't look up as she filled a big white cup and started from the kitchen toward Lees' room. Now Ollendorf watched her, covertly; his manner puzzled Jarris. Ollendorf seemed to be anticipating something.

It took only a minute to reach the bedroom from the kitchen. A second one ticked off as the two men silently drank together. Then they heard the girl running back through the hall. She stopped in the doorway, a hand gripping the frame till her knuckles whitened. She was gasping. "Father's dead!"

"You don't mean it!" Dirk leaped up, kicking back his chair so it fell over backward. He acted astounded—too astounded, decided Jarris.

"Get Aunt Emmy," ordered Louise, bracing herself.

Dirk hurried off, Louise after him. Jarris trailed them. He saw Dirk kick in Aunt Emmy's door and go inside for she was deaf and wouldn't hear knocking or calls. Jarris followed Louise into her father's room. The mute figure lay sprawled on the bed, partially covered by a blanket. But now release had come for Lewis Lees.

Jarris stepped close. The lamp was still turned down and in the dim light everything looked all right; but as he stooped, he could distinguish unusual wrinkles in the parchment-like, hollow cheeks as though they had been pulled out of shape. He recalled Ollendorf's sudden puzzling appearance on the other side of the house while Louise had been in the kitchen, fixing the coffee Dirk had asked for.

Lees' arms stuck out as they had fallen; he might have raised them in a feeble attempt to push away powerful hands that had shut off his breath...

Jarris was tremendously disturbed. He hurriedly checked further, aware it would have taken but a brief time to smother the helpless invalid. He was at this when he glanced up and in the large mirror saw Ollendorf standing in the doorway, watching him. He straightened and said calmly, "His heart stopped, I reckon, Cousin Louise."

At this, Dirk came in, and Aunt Emmy, a wrap around her stout body, hustled by them. Both women began to cry, holding to each other.

There was no more sleep that night. After about an hour Blackie and the cowboys came back, reporting a fruitless hunt in the dark for the supposed intruder. The solemn Ollendorf passed around the news of Lewis Lees' death.

Jarris did what he could, which wasn't too much. As gray dawn came up over the range, he saw one of Dirk's men—a carbine aslant at his cantle—slowly riding circle around the buildings. For the time being, Jarris kept his ideas of what Ollendorf had done to himself.

Before noon they buried Lewis Lees on the hill overlooking his home and Silver River. Dirk Ollendorf stood stanch with an arm around Louise, and Jarris heard him say gruffly, "He's better off now than the way he was, honey." He was acting the part of the strong masculine comforter, thought Jarris; he couldn't help glancing at Dirk's hairy, powerful hands—a killer's paws.

THEY ATE some dinner, though the women only pecked at the food. In the heat of the afternoon everybody took a siesta. Jarris was in his room; about three-thirty he got up, fixed a smoke and stepped outside, into the dusty yard.

Jarris didn't like the change in the atmosphere—for it had changed. He had a barometric sensitiveness in such situations, and had been saved more than once by this sixth sense or whatever it was. Since his return from Silverton the night before, Dirk Ollendorf seemed to have taken a very positive stand. Jarris wondered if something had occurred in town to needle Dirk.

He was thinking this over, trying to guess what it might be, as he neared the stable he had cleaned his first day at the Double L. Ollendorf suddenly bobbed up in the open half door and, leaning on the narrow shelf, stared at Jarris. "We enjoyed your visit, Cousin," said Dirk. "Enjoyed it aplenty."

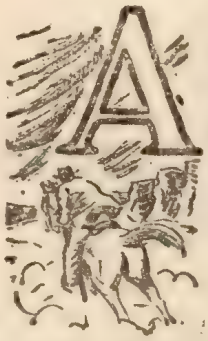
Jarris didn't need any more warning. But a couple of the tough waddies Dirk employed came up at either side of the manager. Over at the bunkhouse, three more materialized; one holding a double-barreled shotgun at a suggestive angle.

They had obviously been waiting for him to come out, so they could pin him. It could mean anything, and he wondered what. Maybe they hadn't found any fresh tracks left by the supposed intruder the night before—the man Jarris had said he'd seen running toward the river. Maybe the cowboy who had sighted Jarris under the window had belatedly decided he had recognized "Cousin "Bob" in the dark. Possibly his check-up of Lees' body had been enough to panic the shaky Ollendorf.

All this surged through his acute mind in lightning speed. Outwardly he didn't turn a hair. He sought to behave as a happy-go-lucky youth, such as the fictional Bob Tillman, would under the circumstances. Playing a role and keeping it consistent every instant while under observation was extremely difficult and a little slip could mean ruin.

Jarris nodded. "Well, it's been great here, Dirk. I aimed to hang around a while, but if I'm in your way I'll mosey along." He put a touch of hurt feelings into his voice, learing against the stable wall so he half-faced the bunkhouse and Ollendorf too. If they came at him, he couldn't hope to get clear but he would take a couple with him; and Ollendorf would be his prime target.

6



AFTER A brief pause, Ollendorf said with heavy-handed humor, "Take my advice, Cousin Bob, and don't hang around anywhere. It ain't comfortable—at least, so I been told."

There were six of them in sight. Jarris didn't see Blackie, and the balance of the hands, but they might be concealed nearby, their guns trained on him. As the seconds ticked off he decided that Dirk didn't mean to go for him then and there in the yard—not if it could be helped. While Louise Lees and Aunt Emmy were preoccupied with their mourning, the gunning of the guest would be too crude for Ollendorf to get away with.

Jarris carefully moved, aware that proddy characters such as Ollendorf might misinterpret any sudden shift. "I'll pack my gear," he said humbly.

"I'll give you a hand," said Dirk. A jerk of his head ordered one of the men to trail them.

They started for the house, Ollendorf behind Jarris and Mickey, a gangling Texan with a tobacco cud bulging his cheek, right after them. Before going in, Jarris said over his

shoulder, "What shall I tell Aunt Emmy and Louise?"

"That's your problem; better think up something that sounds good."

They trooped through the kitchen, Jarris ahead, Dirk and Mickey keeping close. Louise and Aunt Emmy were in the living room, the elder woman with the family Bible open on her capacious lap. She had on a rusty-black silk dress and both women had been weeping.

"Sit down, boys, sit down," invited Aunt Emmy. "I've just been reading from the Good Book it's a powerful comfort."

"I can't stay, Aunt Emmy." Jarris bent over and put an arm around her plump shoulders. "I got to mosey along. I just remembered I got to meet a rancher hombre in Silverton; he asked me to give him a hand for a while, and I promised him."

Louise's eyes quickly sought Jarris' but he avoided her look. He thought she seemed not only shocked but reproachful, and her impression would be that he was deserting her.

"You shouldn't leave us now," chided Aunt Emmy; "it's a real comfort to have you around, Robert."

"I give my word, so I better sasahy. I'm sorry."

"You can come on back when you finish," said Dirk heartily.

"Sure, I'll be back as soon as I can."

He kissed Aunt Emmy's warm cheek and she patted his. "Don't you want to eat before you ride?" she asked.

"No thanks; I'll get a bite in town." He turned to Louise. "Adios, Cousin Lou. I'll see you again."

She only nodded, staring at her folded hands.

Ollendorf and Mickey followed him through the dog run, open at one side, a blank wall on the other. The hounds whined and jumped, and Jarris patted heads en route. In his room, Jarris began to pack while Dirk waited by the door, his broad back to the wall, Mickey in the corridor. It didn't take Jarris long, and he put his bags and cattle roll under a long arm. With his watchful escort, he cut through the dog run, around the bulk of the house to the yard.

"Say, we're real hospitable," observed Ollendorf. "One of the boys has your horse all saddled for you, Cousin."

"Gracias." Jarris went, stiff-legged, toward his strong brown gelding. He slung the bags over and secured his roll; then he checked the cinches.

He kept expecting something to happen but nothing did. He didn't hurry, but he knew he'd be relieved when the Double L yard was out of easy gunshot behind him. So far, he had had no hint of what had aroused Ollendorf to the point of ejecting him from the ranch. He hadn't been disarmed, and his side-gun stayed in its holster—while under his shirt was the comforting bulk of his pet Colt. They could easily have removed his carbine from the saddle-boot but they hadn't.

"So long, boys," he said, swinging into the saddle.

"Adios, Cousin," said Dirk. The others didn't say anything; Blackie and the missing waddies still hadn't showed.

It wasn't far to the wooden bridge over Silver River, although it seemed a long, long run to Marty Jarris with Ollendorf at his back Tony's shod-hoofs drummed hollowy on the loose planks, splintered and indented by many such passages. He swung to the ridge road overlooking the long valley. West and north rose the forested mountains, with Silverton to the south, ahead of him,

Jarris was not only relieved, but surprised at being allowed to ride away; if Dirk were really worried about what he might have seen and heard, it wasn't likely the manager would let him reach the authorities with his story. Possibly Dirk just wanted him out of the way; maybe he thought that "Cousin Bob" and Louise Lees were becoming too friend-

ly. Or he might have future operations in mind, operations he couldn't bring off with Jarris around the place.

HE HAD MADE half a mile when he again glanced back. Ollendorf and three men were crossing the bridge. They hit the road but they did not attempt to overtake him, simply riding behind him. Maybe Dirk wanted to make sure he left the vicinity.

But Jarris was worried; he grew most alert as he tried to put himself in Ollendorf's place. Would he let a dangerous witness go, even if he had swallowed the "cousin" yarn? "I wouldn't," he murmured to Tony.

Jarris knew how most outlaws got started. A young fellow would steal—maybe a few head of cattle. If the victim caught up with him, the thief might kill to shield himself. That would mean he would probably have to use his guns again, against others on his trail, until he grew hardened to it; the death of another man meant nothing except an extra notch on his Colt handle. It was an inexorable chain, forged one link after another, until its maker was completely bound. Ollendorf had first stolen cows off the Red River range; then a line-rider had been shot. Others were on the burly man's trail, and Dirk had killed that second cowboy at the *Road to Ruin*, always trying to cover himself desperate to stay free. And Jarris was after him, although how much Ollendorf suspected about that was still a puzzle.

His eyes roved, ahead, checking every point. He hadn't forgotten the missing segundo and those other hands. Another look told him that Dirk was still coming at that easy, jogging pace. From the height, Jarris could see the low ranch house across the river, the shapes of the buildings and pens. He studied the dirt track ahead. The slope to his left was gradual, and without much cover in the way of brush and rocks. But a few hundred yards on, the road curved where a yellow-clay bluff crowded it. The highest point was toward him and bushes fringed the bluff brink; it would be a perfect spot for dry-gulchers to lie in wait for a rider coming from the Double L.

Already, he was within rifle shot. On his right the land dropped away, a steep slide for a horse but nearer the bluff it grew worse. Bunches of Double L cattle grazed on the grassy meadows along the river, or in the draws. It was certainly four-thirty now with the sun a brilliant yellow over the forested hills.

A big Monarch butterfly, lazily drifting low over the bushes on the bluff, suddenly darted upward. That was enough for Jarris and he said, "Don't slip, Tony!" and sharply jerked his right rein, turning the brown gelding down the bank.

It took only an instant to tell him he had been right, and he heard the bullet's sharp shriek over his head as a rifle crackled from the bluff lip; but he couldn't look just then, because he must hold the rein tight as he tried to help Tony down the steep drop. The gelding's hoofs dug into the soft turf, the big horse's head came up and he slewed around as he fought to keep from falling. Jarris kicked a toe loose, ready to jump if he had to, but then Tony caught his footing, jumped a jagged rock and reached the gentler slant.

Now, Jarris could spare a glance backward; two more slugs kicked up globs of earth around his moving horse. Blackie's slight figure showed on the bluff and there were three more with him. They were all trying for Jarris but the range was rather long. They had been lying up there in the brush, cozily, waiting for him to ride right under their gun-muzzles; his sudden divergence had saved his life for the moment. Jarris didn't waste any time returning their fire. A revolver was no good at such distance, and he needed a start more than he

did the dubious satisfaction of throwing some carbine metal back at his foes.

Ollendorf and those on the road, seeing that Jarris was escaping, dug in their spurs. They were too far off to hope for a hit, but, led by Dirk, the Double L men cut down at an angle after Jarris.

HE HEARD the menacing song of three more bullets but they were farther off, and he reached the river bank without being hit. Blackie and his contingent quit shooting and left the bluff-edge, probably going for their horses to join the chase. Dirk was well ahead of his bunched men. The manager was a good rider but a hard one; he kept gouging and quirting his powerful black mount, his strong legs clinched tight, trunk erect, as though part of his horse, swaying only as the jolting, fast-running animal did.

Jarris gaged the start he had. The river flowed deep and wide before him, and he was faced by an undercut, six-foot bank. He had to swing and hurry down the line, losing precious yardage, to a side cut where he could reach the water; then he set Tony into the stream and the gelding was soon swimming, the man floating off and kicking along beside his horse. He had no time to protect his guns and the water quickly soaked through his clothes, cool to his flesh.

They came up, dripping, on the other side. Tony rippled his glistening hide in the shallows. Jarris remounted and headed for a patch of spruce a hundred yards from the bank. There were cattle around, placidly chewing their cuds; they lifted their blunt wet muzzles to stare at the rider. Ollendorf had his carbine to shoulder, and tried three times for Jarris.

The range was broken by patches of woods and rock outcrops. Now it was uphill all the way. Jarris elected to head for the tall timber, the wild, dark-forested land westward rather than try for the settlement downriver. Ollendorf could trail him to Silverton too easily; he wasn't even sure about Anson, the town marshal; Anson was a friend of Dirk's, and might be an accomplice; certainly Ollendorf had been let off easily after shooting the Red River cowboy.

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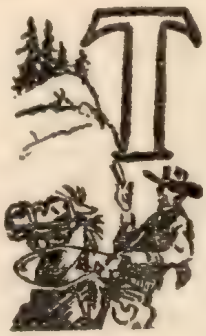


THE UPHILL grind told more on Dirk's black than on Tony, for the manager was heavier than Jarris and a ruthless quirter. The others, their mounts not so fine, dropped behind and they were strung out all the way to river. Blackie and his bunch had not yet reached the stream.

Jarris finally made the deep woods, and moved through aisles among tall evergreens. Underhoof were needles, the droppings of centuries, and here and there the trees were so close together he had to skirt for hundreds of yards to locate an opening. The sun was cut off; in the perpetual gloom the lower limbs of spruces and pines had died from lack of light and air.

Moving as he was, the air had partially dried him. He couldn't see his pursuers although he heard distant shouts, probably Ollendorf calling to his men. Jarris dove deeper and deeper into the forests, pushing on....

When night fell, he stopped and dismounted. After listening for a spell, hearing only Nature's sounds, he concluded that Ollendorf had abandoned the chase.

Jarris had to see to his weapons at once. He unloaded his guns and set about it. The cantle roll, protected by the slicker tightly tucked around it, was fairly dry and he used the tail of his spare shirt to swab out the barrels and wipe off the greased metal. He unsaddled the weary geld-

ing, staked him, and at last lay down on a pine-needle bed, covered by his slicker with the blanket over it.

During the night he awakened several times, shivering in the blackness. It was dank and cold. Now, in the first relaxing of the forest gloom, Jarris rose and walked around, slapping his arms to restore his circulation.

He knew about where he was. Without food, he dared not shoot game for the reports might bring Ollendorf upon him. He thought they would expect him to circle and make for Silverton and that helped decide his course—that and his determination to complete the job he had started. Jarris had a stubborn, bulldog nature; he needed it to brace the type of outlaw he usually pursued.

And he found that, besides his primary purpose in arresting the raiders led by Ollendorf, he was also anxious about Louise Lees. Dirk had suddenly embarked upon a series of moves obviously designed to dispose of all possible opposition. "I'll go back there as soon as I can," he promised himself.

Alone and cut off, he felt entirely capable of taking care of himself. He was considering Vance O'Brien, the squatter up Silver River. Originally, O'Brien had owed what allegiance the untamed Irishman cared to offer, to Lewis Lees. There was little doubt O'Brien had been working with Ollendorf during the rustling operations, but that might have been for a very good reason. O'Brien wasn't the type to knuckle under to anybody, even to Ollendorf. He would gladly fight to the death for a friend, but he couldn't be pushed around.

Yet Jarris felt he must be most circumspect in his approach. Dirk might have spread the alarm to O'Brien, to shoot "Cousin Bob" on sight, basing the order on some trumped-up yarn.

THE WOODS were slower but safer than the winding trails. It was near noon by the time he had worked through the gloomy, dense forests to the vicinity where he had previously noted smoke, upstream from the beautiful waterfall at which he had encountered Vance O'Brien. Louise had told him about where the squatter's home stood.

In the warm air, he caught the aromatic scent of pine-wood smoke. Dropping rein among the evergreens, he stole forward, dry needles whispering softly under his carefully paced feet. The sound of a woman singing drew him, and after a few hundred yards he found he was close to the river. Through a narrow vista he could see the sparkling mountain stream as it ran through its twisting cut toward the falls below. Over this low, musical accompaniment rose the sweet but thin voice of the singer. Keeping down, he soon placed her. Splashings came and the words grew distinguishable. She sang in an English touched by brogue yet softened and influenced by a Spanish accent:

Laydees-lef'-han'-to-yer-sonnees,
Alaman-grine-rigtan-lef'—

It took him a moment to realize what she was saying but he had heard callers at square dances and remembered some of that one:

Ladies, left hand to your sonnies,
Alaman, grind right and left.
Balance all and swing your honeys—
Pick 'em off their feet and heft.

It was comical to hear the homely words so abused. He pressed nearer for a look at the vocalist. Peeking through breaks in the brush he looked down at the pool formed where the

river had cut into the high bank. In the shallows, a slender girl disported herself, bathing and singing. Droplets of water sparkled in her blue-black hair, hanging to her rounded, slim hips, her smooth flesh a golden hue. She was beautifully made, still in the period of transition from adolescence to full womanhood.

Any man would have taken a long look and Jarris did. Then he noticed the broken-down, wooden trough on the other side of the pool, some weathered piles of reddish gravel and small stones, signs of placer mining.

Making sure he wasn't being watched, he recalled Louise's information concerning O'Brien, that the Irishman was married and had a growing daughter. This must be the child. He withdrew, silently, and circled all the way back and around the other way. This time he came to the clearing off from the river. A shack with heavy pine-log walls, the slab roof chinked with mud, had been snugged into a hillside. Smoke came from an outside stone hearth and a fat, slovenly woman in a shapeless brown homespun dress was watching the blackened kettle suspended from a tripod. Steam came from the pot and the stew's odor made the hungry Jarris' nostrils quiver, as did the pot of coffee hanging near it.

He didn't see O'Brien. There was a small corral off to one side and in it a couple of horses—one was the black the Irishman had been riding when he had come upon Jarris at the falls. Some deerskins were stretched on a drying rack, a pile of rusty tin cans and other garbage showed at the edge of the clearing. It looked like a typical squatter's shack, crude, patched-up, untidy with the litter around it.

There were no saddled mounts, nothing to show that Ollendorf or an agent of the manager's had arrived but they might have come and gone. However, Jarris meant to chance it; he took a stand by the thick bole of a giant spruce at the south margin.

"Senora O'Brien!" he sang out.

THE WOMAN started and stood up, looking fearfully around to place the voice. Jarris stepped out so she could see him and without going closer, waved and said, "Is your husband home? If he is, will you ask him to come out?"

Before he had finished she turned and padded, her bare brown feet twinkling, to the open door. He heard shirll, excited Spanish, and then Vance O'Brien came out with a carbine in one big hand.

"Hello, O'Brien." Jarris waved at the man but kept close to the thick spruce, ready to jump for it if O'Brien was hostile.

"Why, it's yourself!" cried O'Brien, his wide mouth breaking into a grin. "Come in, son, come in; is the little lady with you?" His greeting was hearty, without guile.

Jarris stepped forward. "She's not."

O'Brien leaned the carbine against the shack wall and came toward him, his hand out. "You look peaked," he said. "Come eat dinner with me. Conchita—" He looked back and rapped fluid Spanish at his mate.

"Gracias. I need to talk to you, O'Brien."

"Sure, sure, but let's have chuck first. You need it; I can see that."

Jarris chose a seat on a split log with his back to the cliff; he could watch the approaches from that point and he didn't want to go indoors, not yet. The cabin could be a deadly trap if Ollendorf came up or if O'Brien were dissembling.

O'Brien wore no gunbelt and his carbine had been left several steps away, leaning against the wall. The Irishman sat down facing Jarris and brought out a sack of tobacco and some brown papers, passing the makings to his guest. Then the Mexican woman brought out a bottle of whiskey, two tin cups, and drinks were poured. She went about her work as the men tried out the liquor, setting forth plates and metal knives and spoons of which she seemed inordinately proud, making sure the guest noticed them.

"Christine—Christine! Come and get it!" roared O'Brien, his powerful voice ringing in the forest aisles. He turned back to Jarris. "That's my daughter," he explained. "She's over at the river." The brogue thickened his voice although many of his expressions were Texan.

"I could sure do with a meal, O'Brien." Jarris hungrily eyed the food as the whiskey burned his empty stomach. His tobacco and papers had been soaked and he was glad of the smoke, drawing in deeply.

"We'll fill up before we spiel," said O'Brien.

The woman dished out spoonsful of steaming stew and it was delicious, mixed venison and rabbit, with some beef chunks. It was hotly flavored and he could see strings of dried red peppers hanging inside the cabin. But he was used to Mexican seasoning. Deep drafts of molasses-sweetened coffee braced him up.

THE MEN were halfway through the meal when the slender girl wandered in. She had bound back her dark tresses with a red ribbon and the plain cotton dress couldn't hide her loveliness. She stopped as she saw the visitor, as startled as a wild creature at sight of an intruder.

Jarris watched her, for she was a beautiful sight. The mother must have been handsome when O'Brien had married her but only traces remained; life had coarsened her and she had taken on much weight. Suddenly Jarris realized that O'Brien was scowling at him with narrowed eyes. He looked away, quickly, for he could read the paternal jealousy. "Christine, this here is Bob, Miss Louise's cousin I told ye about."

The full red lips parted, disclosing pearly teeth. She curtseyed in Spanish style and came slowly toward them. Jarris took care not to stare again.

He couldn't fail to notice how Christine behaved. Instantly self-conscious in his presence, her sparkling eyes shone with interest in Jarris. She walked in front of him with the exaggerated hip-swing of a dance-hall woman, watching Jarris for his reaction. O'Brien didn't miss it, either, and as she passed near her father he reached out and smacked her, saying, "Put on your slippers and then come get your food before it's cold."

Her dignity ruffled, Christine fled into the cabin. Her mother paid no heed to this display of fatherly authority, but sat off from the men, watching for a chance to serve her lord and master.

The warm food, the sunshine coming through the break in the great forest, had given Jarris new power. Apparently O'Brien had no gun on him and Jarris was sure, if it came down to it, that he could get into action well ahead of the squatter. He watched O'Brien intently as he spoke.

"There's been some trouble at the ranch, O'Brien."

O'Brien glanced questioningly at him; he seemed solicitous. "Between ye and the little lady?"

"No. Have you heard that Lewis Lees is dead?"

"No!" The surprised sorrow that sprang to O'Brien's eyes were certainly genuine. "Poor man; he was my good friend." He turned and spoke Spanish to the woman who only shook her head sadly. "Well, maybe it's better the Good Lord took him. He was a mighty sick chicken. Anybody who savvied him like I did knows he'd rather be dead and gone than helpless like he was—no use to himself and a burden on them all. Ah, till he was hurt he was strong, he loved to ride and we had many a fine hunt together in the mountains." Tears came into the rough squatter's eyes.

O'Brien must have been truly fond of Lewis Lees. Jarris said carefully, "Lees didn't die naturally; he was killed. Dick Ollendorf shut off his breath and smothered him."

It was blunt, but Jarris wanted O'Brien's reaction.

8

AT FIRST, O'Brien wouldn't believe it. Jarris, watching all the time for enemy approach, earnestly described what had happened. "All Dirk had to do was hold his hand over Lees' nose and mouth. Lees was helpless, you know that—helpless as a baby."

"But why, why?" Ollendorf always worked hard for the Boss. We even went over together—" O'Brien broke it off short and his wide mouth set grimly.

Jarris, keen on the blood trail, never relenting, spoke on. He was guessing now but it was shrewd conjecture, based on observation and small clues he had picked up during his investigation. "Ollendorf wouldn't hesitate to kill any man who was in his way; you savvy that. He shot a cowboy over on the Red River range while he was rustling cattle there. He downed another in Silverton, a Z Bar kid who rode over here, like a fool, hunting for the man who'd plugged his sidekick. Night before last he smothered Lees, and yesterday Dirk and his men ran me off and tried to drygulch me on the Silverton road—they figured it would be too messy at the ranch. I managed to break free and came up here to see if you'd give me a lift."

O'Brien had drawn in a deep breath and was still holding it, his face growing redder and redder. He exhaled explosively, and growled, "You savvy a hell of a lot!"

"Sure I do. I want to give Louise a hand. Ollendorf fired the men Lees trusted and hired his own crew, a bunch of tough gunners. Then he began running beeves off the west range and got away with plenty until he ran into that mess. Now he's trying to cover his tracks. Also, I believe he has another plan—but I ain't sure yet what it is. Were you along with him when he downed that first Bar line rider?"

O'Brien began cursing, but he wasn't swearing at Jarris; he was angry at Ollendorf. "Sucked me into it, said the ranch was going bust and we had to help out Lees. That's why I went along. I couldn't say no to that; Lees had done too much for me and he was sick, down and out. So we rode over and brought through several bunches without any trouble. Then, one morning, we bumped into that line-rider. Ollendorf blasted him out of his hull before we could stop the loco fool; we dropped what we'd picked up that trip and hustled for home, covering the trail."

It was just about as Jarris had figured it. "When you saw me at the falls you thought I was hunting the killers, didn't you?"

"That's it. I was trying to perfect the Double L. But—" O'Brien was confused and ran his long fingers through his curly, uncombed black hair.

"Ollendorf got you involved and then crossed you by killing Lees; you only went into it to help Lees."

O'Brien nodded. He got up and turned toward the shack. Jarris alerted; O'Brien might be trying to reach his carbine, but the Irishman passed it without glancing at it, and reaching in, took a fresh bottle of whiskey from a shelf. He pulled the cork with his strong teeth and threw back his head, letting the fiery liquid flow down his throat. The Mexican woman began to look worried as O'Brien's gullet worked up and down and the level of the fluid dropped with astonishing speed. When O'Brien finished, he smacked his lips, wiped his mouth and the bottle neck with his shirt sleeve, and passed the flask to Jarris.

JARRIS took a brief one for the sake of appearances, and returned the bottle to O'Brien, who listened as the manhunter expounded his theory; as Jarris talked, O'Brien kept

swigging at the liquor. "Ollendorf has something up his sleeve, O'Brien. He's determined not to run away; he wants to marry Louise so he can cinch his hold on the Double L, that's plain. My idea is to block him and help Lees' daughter. Will you go along with me?"

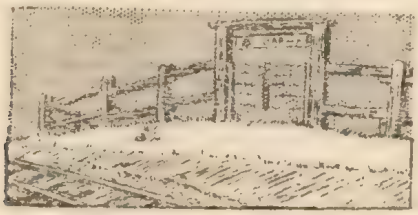
O'Brien had another drink as he thought about it. "I'll catch it if they find out about that Z Bar lad."

"No, you won't. Ollendorf did the shooting; you can swear to him if it comes down to that."

The Irishman shrugged. "All right, I'll do it; I owe it to Lew Lees."

Christine came to the door. She leaned there and O'Brien's glance strayed to her. Jarris knew he must be thinking about what would happen to her if he died, or was sent to prison. Jarris stood up; he hoped to lead the talk around to those abandoned placer-workings he had seen by Christine's pool. He could see the winding path going toward the bank. "What's over this way?" he asked.

"The river." O'Brien rose and joined him, and they walked along the path.



The placer-mine came into sight. "What's that?" asked Jarris. "Is that what Ollendorf hopes to grab?"

O'Brien shook his head. "That's an old silver mine. Shucks, it ain't worth bothering with; you can dig silver anywhere in these hills, but it don't pay."

O'Brien ought to know, thought Jarris; he had to abandon the placer-workings as a motive for Ollendorf's behavior.

They returned to the shack. Jarris believed he had won a valuable ally as well as a star witness. He held out his hand. "I'll mosey now, O'Brien. I'm going to Silverton. In case Dirk shows up here, play like nothing's happened, savvy? I'll be in touch with you pronto."

O'Brien nodded as they shook hands. "If you ride downriver, Dirk will get ye."

"I don't aim to; I'll work through the woods till I'm close to town."

"You'll find it slow going, but it's safer. Stick to the line of ridges on this side of the valley. You'll find a bridge near Silverton if ye don't want to swim it."

O'Brien gave him dry matches, tobacco and papers, and grease for his guns. The Irishman seemed greatly depressed. Moodily, he picked up the bottle again as Jarris walked swiftly toward the margin of the woods. Glancing back, as a routine precaution, Jarris waved. Christine had come outside and was staring at him. She smiled and waved back. Jarris hastily ducked into the forest and dogtrotted toward his horse. The meal had done wonders for him and he was heartened at having won over O'Brien. He was tightening the noose around Dirk Ollendorf's bull neck....

Two hours later a rabbit ran past him, veering as it saw him. Jarris stopped his mount and listened; then he got down and dropped rein, stealing forward on foot. He had been traveling along the west boundary ridges of the river valley, keeping to the woods, finding an animal trail here and there; but still, as O'Brien had said, it was rough, slow going. Occasionally he could see down into the wide, lovely valley where Silver River flowed south after making its bend on the Double L.

Off to the right he heard cracklings. It was a doe with her fawn, retreating swiftly. Jarris needed no more warning; he hustled back to Tony and took the same direction the deer had. Soon he came to a dense grove of giant spruce, their outer branches dusty-green all the way to the ground. The needles hid tracks and he shoved through, careful not to snap off any fronds. In there, the circular grove was hol-

lowed out because of the dead limbs, cut off from the sunlight. There was room in there for several men and their horses. He found a spot and holding back limbs, worked Tony in. He tied his bandana around the horse's muzzle. Carbine loaded, he moved to the east side of the grove and lay flat, watching through a narrow vista.

Ten minutes later a rider came into his range of vision. It was a cowboy named Vern, one of Ollendorf's gunhands.

Vern was moving very slowly, pausing now and then to listen. He would freeze and look all around. raising his rifle as he did so. Jarris waited silently.

9

JARRIS heard more faint noises on the far side of the spruce grove. Vern kept looking that way; after waiting a time the hunter raised a hand, evidently signalling another Double L man. They were coming through, searching for him. Chances were that Dirk, disappointed at not catching him in Silverton, had set them to combing the woods, the line designed to root him out in case Jarris were coming down that way. Unless the fugitive had plunged westward through the wooden mountains, on a long, hard run to the Red River ranges, Ollendorf knew Jarris must be up here somewhere. Dirk had been upset enough to want him killed, and the agile skill with which the supposed "Cousin Bob" had eluded the death trap on the road must have increased Ollendorf's gnawing worry about Jarris.

He lay doggo until they shoved on. The sounds of their progress gradually faded off toward O'Brien's.

When he was fairly certain they had all passed, Jarris led Tony from the other side of the clump, and mounting, kept on. But he went slower and slower, often pausing to check. Here and there he would get down and go to the edge of the woods so he might look down across the cattle range toward Silver River.

Then, far behind him, Jarris heard the echoing crack of a gun. He turned, rein in hand, staring in that direction. Two more followed, almost together. As far as he could judge they had come from about the spot where O'Brien's cabin stood.

It worried him. O'Brien had been sopping up the whiskey and perhaps, his tongue loosened by liquor, the hot-headed Irishman had given himself away. The hunters had had enough time to reach the clearing, from the way they had been moving, Jarris thought that Ollendorf had had a semi-circular arc of riders coming through a large area of the forest, hoping to sweep him up.

He moved on but O'Brien's fate preyed on him. Possibly a searcher had mistaken a running deer for the quarry and opened fire. He tried to tell himself the shots hadn't meant anything significant, for he needed to reach Silverton.

But it wasn't any good; at last he turned back, knowing he had to make sure about O'Brien.

The return run took longer because the wind was now in the enemy's favor, and he had no way of guessing what the sweepers' next move might be. Ollendorf could have picked up some sign of Jarris at O'Brien's; maybe the woman or Christine had told Dirk of the visitor. Possibly O'Brien, in his cups, had decided to cross Jarris and throw in with Ollendorf—Jarris could not afford to overlook the slightest possibilities in order to survive as a manhunter....

This time he had to leave Tony farther out, the horse muzzled, the rein down. He crept toward the clearing. Not a sound except the trill of a bird or the soft rustle of fronds disturbed the afternoon. He knew

death might be reaching out for him. Though used to the idea, during a dangerous investigation, that a tearing slug might hit him at any moment, he found he was bracing himself for the shock.

He stopped, again and again, to listen and to search the forest aisles with narrowed eyes. It was after five o'clock and what light came in was reddish as the sun dropped to the western hills. Flattened out, he finally sighted the shack, snugged into its bluff; the door stood wide but nobody moved in the clearing. He began to circle, peeking in every few steps at the cabin. The outside hearth looked cold.

Jarris stayed back in the brush. Every so often a slight noise would cause him to whirl, gun up, but each time it was a false alarm. He was more than halfway around the clearing when he found himself blocked by the rising hump of land into which O'Brien had built his home for protection against the northers.

Then he saw Vance O'Brien sprawled on his wide back among the trees, thirty feet from the edge of the clearing.

JARRIS' breath caught sharply and then rage burned him. He made another cautious check before going to the body. He didn't need to bend down to find out that O'Brien was dead for he could see the bullethole through the head from temple to temple. It had been inflicted by a large-caliber pistol and at close range for one side was flecked and powder-burned. No gun lay by the Irishman, and a quick search told there was none on him.

What had happened to Christine and her mother? He turned toward the silent shack, straightening up. For an instant he was off guard, as he swung, and then he saw the bow-legged Blackie, Ollendorf's segundo, jump to the doorway.

Blackie had a rifle up and aimed. Jarris twisted himself violently, throwing himself to the ground as the segundo pulled trigger. The vicious whip of the heavy slug was only inches over him. Jarris hastily fired back, hoping to rattle Blackie; he realized that Blackie must have been hidden in the shack, watching O'Brien's body through a gap, with the hope that Jarris would eventually come to it.

He began rolling and a second bullet slashed into the brown earth a yard from him, Blackie's aim spoiled as the rifle muzzle jerked, the marksman flinching from the Colt's blast and the rap of metal into the log cabin wall. "There he goes, Dirk, there he goes!" shrieked Blackie, his voice shrill with excitement, ringing in the woods, echoing from the bluff.

Jarris made it behind a thick tree bole and came up to a squatting position. Another Double L man showed beside Blackie in the doorway. Jarris let go and Blackie jumped back, colliding with his aide. They were both in such a hurry to get out of sight they fell and rolled out of the door line.

But Blackie, safe inside the thick-walled cabin, kept up his yelling: "Dirk, he's on the south side! Get him. There he goes, through the woods!"

Jarris knew he had walked into a trap. But Blackie's next penetrating call stunned him.

"He just shot O'Brien," shrilled the other man in the shack.

"He killed O'Brien," bellowed the other man in the shack.

"He shot O'Brien, he shot O'Brien!" They kept it up, howling the accusation between advice to Ollendorf as to Jarris' movements.

"So that's their game," muttered Jarris. They meant to lay the killing to him. But why they bothered to shriek it to an apparently deserted wilderness was a puzzle.

He glanced back, his mouth grim. He had escaped injury and hoped to reach Tony. Ollendorf and the other Double L hunters must be close at hand. He could hear the segundo, "There he is—he killed O'Brien," and the lower accompaniment of the waddy, "He shot him, he shot O'Brien cold!"

Sharp sounds, an answering shout, running feet and crackling of brush came from Jarris' right. He saw it was Vern, with his rifle up. Jarris veered off and the quick exchange of shots rapped through the woods while Vern added his excited calls to the hubbub.

PISTOL raised, Jarris heard others; they seemed to be everywhere about him. He had left Tony well out from the clearing and fleet of foot as he was, the high-heeled riding boots weren't made for that type of speed; he wished he had changed to his moccasins, a pair of which he carried in his roll.

He was watching for Vern from the right and was nearly hit by a bullet from another angle. The whip wasn't six inches from his ear, and the report rolled deep-throated through the trees. He zigzagged, jumping for another spruce bole. When he glanced over, he saw it was Ollendorf who had nearly got him. The manager was on a fresh mustang, one of his string, and had a large-caliber carbine snugged to his beefy shoulder. Hurrying up behind him were three others, two of them Double L retainers, the third an elderly man in a black hat and leather pants, a five-pointed star pinned to his gray shirt. The salted spade beard marked him and Jarris knew who he was: it was Anson, the marshal from Silverton. Now Jarris understood the reason for the accusations.

The marshal and the others opened fire on the running Jarris. He threw a quick one at Dirk, but the range was long for a revolver and he knew his only chance was to reach his horse.

Dirk was nearest and dug in his spurs as Jarris flitted from tree to tree. The horse's speed, though Ollendorf had to weave in and out to avoid thickets, rapidly brought the manager within easy killing distance. Ahead of him, Jarris could see Tony, his velvet ears pricked up at the startling sounds.

Breath rasping, Jarris put all he had left into that last dash. Ollendorf was coming fast, bearing down with the carbine ready to kill. Behind him, whooping it up like fox hunters hot on the quarry, came Olsen and the rest. Blackie was still shrieking about O'Brien. Jarris knew that, even if he could be sure that Marshal Anson was on the level, he would never get a chance to talk to the officer. The Double L would shoot him before he could convince Anson about anything.

Jarris thrust his Colt into his pocket, seized the rein as he hit leather in a frantic bound. Tony was moving as Jarris leaned forward to pull off the bandanna muzzle. The woods had grown gloomy as the sun dipped behind the mountains. Still, there was enough light left for sighting on such a large target as a rider. Ollendorf was ripping through, shouting at him. Jarris swung, taking the nearest avenue through the forest, anything to gain a little space. As he glanced back over a hunched shoulder, he saw that Dirk had pulled up and was aiming, taking a lead as he would in shooting a running animal.

Jarris jerked rein and Tony responded. But Jarris' left leg went numb; he couldn't tell the exact spot where he had been hit but he knew he'd got it. He clinched on the saddle and used his free hand to grip the horn for shock nearly overcame him. He gritted his teeth, fighting it. Spots danced before his eyes and he shook his head groggily. Then he began to feel aching pain from his booted toes to his hip. Tony had taken an unusually long bound for-

ward as Jarris caught it, but it was several jumps before the wounded manhunter, now being run to earth himself, realized that his horse, too, must be hurt. The angle of the bullet, driving through the rider's leg, made it certain.

ANXIOUSLY he loosened his toes in the tapped stirrups. He sought to estimate Tony's injury even though the powerful horse maintained his stride, driving on at full speed. They dropped into a hollow, came up, spurted around a broken area where jagged gray rocks cropped from the earth. This hid him from the pursuers for the time being and he made what he could of it, swinging west and plunging into the thickets, reckless of his neck. Only one thing counted and that was to gain a little time.

"Stay up, Tony, stay up, boy," prayed Jarris.

The bond between such a man as Jarris, and his favorite war horse had always been a close one, and Tony had been his standby for three years, ever since he had quit the Texas Rangers. Though Jarris was in pain himself, he also suffered for his mount. He could feel the awful heaving of the barrel ribs and hear the painful intake of Tony's breath. Bloody lather foamed from the gelding's flared nostrils.

The gloom had thickened. Jarris felt alone, all the odds against him. He had been in many tight positions but there seemed no way out this time.

He was ready to jump but Tony kept on. Jarris turned around some stands of spruce, his foes hidden by contours and the growth. He could feel Tony faltering, the gelding was slowing though he was fighting to stay up in answer to Jarris' whispered urgings.

The man looked back as he had a hundred times during the painful run. He could hear them coming but couldn't see them; and he was sure they had lost sight of him. Any second Tony must collapse. Beyond were tall evergreens with aisles between the brown boles, and, not far off, more rock outcroppings.

Jarris pulled rein sharply and drove through the brushing spruce fronds, ducking to keep from being swept off. The oscillating branches closed behind him. In there it was darker and then he jumped for it, landing on his whole leg, caving in even as Tony crashed close to him.

10

JARRIS LAY for a minute, his head in the crook of his shaking arm. Then he sat up and drew his pistol, the hammer spur back under his thumb; he would fight to the bitter end.

He glanced at the rigid shape of the big horse nearby. Tony was no longer heaving but lay quiet, his long legs out. Sadness gripped Jarris; footloose, never settling down in any place, he had felt very close to his equine friend.

But that was that; he had lost horses before.

It was dark in there, under the spruces, the outside branches brushing the ground. He crouched where he was, the Colt up as he peered at the dense wall. Somebody came within a few steps of him but Jarris kept quiet, and a hoarse voice called, "See him, Dirk?"

Ollendorf answered, "I think he's in those rocks. Watch it, now, let's circle both sides, careful-like."

The voices rang in the forest. In the gloom, believing that Jarris was farther along, the hunters passed the grove, one of many throughout the mountains. They didn't go far and he could hear them beating around, singing out to one another.

They might realize they had overrun him, double back and make a

closer search of every possible hiding place. Jarris began to crawl; blood sloshed in his left boot as he moved. He crept through the grove on a carpet of needles, dragging his injured leg behind him.

After fifty yards he reached the other edge of the grove. He could hear his enemies off toward the rocks. Night was at hand. The black shapes of conifers loomed across the narrow forest break, and he took a chance and went over. A low-growing pine invited him and he slid under it. Dead branches let him shove in to the trunk and lie flat, shielded. He knew he had gone as far as he was going just then.

His head was dizzy. He put down the heavy Colt and lay on his belly, trying to pull himself together. The gloom deepened another shade and a flickering light moved in the woods. They had touched off a torch and were coming back. This time they rounded the grove on his side and he heard Ollendorf's querulous voice: "He must be holed up around here somewheres, Marshal."

"But where's his horse?" asked a grave voice.

"I tell you I hit him. I saw him flinch, and his horse got it, too." Dirk's temper was frayed.

"Then the horse crashed farther on. Why don't we try beyond them rocks?" argued Anson. "Once we find his mustang he can't be far off, that is if you hit like you think you did."

"I did, cuss it!"

They were almost upon Jarris. He lay where he was and then their voices began to fade, not because they had moved away but because he was losing consciousness....

●

When Jarris came to it was pitch-black. He felt dragged out and weak. He worked off his boot and found the wound had crusted over and stopped bleeding. The slug from Ollendorf's carbine had slashed through the calf and pierced Tony's ribs. His boots were no good to him so he pulled off the other one. He shivered for the air had cooled in the night, and lying as he had, Jarris had become chilled. He could hear only the low sough of wind above him, the distant piping of frogs along some forest brook. His mouth was flannel-dry.

After a while he felt a little stronger; he pushed up and stood with his weight resting on his good leg, then gingerly tested the hurt one. He had to grit his teeth but he could stand it; the bones seemed all right. Slowly he worked back to Tony. He had filled his canteen at O'Brien's and took a long drink. Working by touch, he put on his moccasins, and tore strips of cloth from his extra shirt to bind his leg. He discarded his hat, tying a length of shirt around his dark hair, and smeared his cheeks with dirt from under the pine needles. He weighed the advantages of taking his carbine but decided against it. He had another drink to hold him, and in the blackness of the little world under the grove, extracted empty shell cases from his shoulder pistol and reloaded, slipped the gun back.

NOW HE WAS ready; he knew he dared not remain there until daylight. He was sure they would be back for another look and in better light they would discover Tony. He shoved out and stood in the aisle, looking up. He could see a few pin-point stars between the tops of the evergreens and he limped along, not making good time but trying to keep his bearings. This proved impossible; he soon knew he must be off line but when he attempted to return to the dead horse he couldn't find the right grove. He was about to give up when he came upon a small rill cutting through the woods. The cool water refreshed him and he bathed his burning leg.

Each step hurt, and it was a hard trek, but eventually the direction of the flow led him to Silver River—he knew he hadn't crossed the little

side run in approaching and retreating from O'Brien's, and so he could guess the direction in which the cabin lay.

He at last was able to make out the black bulk of the shack; he had come in around the bluff on its west side. A chunk of moon gave a little light in the clearing and he waited, listening.

The door was ajar. Down low, Jarris inched in. This time he was prepared. Ollendorf had nearly snapped the jaws on him before, and there was a good chance that, since Dirk believed his horse had been wounded as well as Jarris, the baited trap would still be waiting.

He flattened to the ground as he caught a faint sound. The light reflected from a man's eyeballs and then a cigaret end glowed startlingly red in the black maw of the cabin. "Blackie!" somebody said in a sharp whisper. "Blackie, wake up, you fool, I think I heard somebody."

Then a mustang, in the nearby pole corral, stamped and whinnied.

"What—what is it?" Blackie spoke too loudly to suit his companion, who said irritatedly, "Shut up, you jack. Keep your voice down."

Stirrings came from the shack. Jarris kept his head down and didn't move a muscle. After a long silence Blackie said, "Aw, you're loco, Sam; you go off half-cocked. It was only the horses in the pen. Quit wakin' me up, it's my turn to snooze."

They left the doorway. Jarris didn't think he'd have a chance of roping a mustang, getting a halter on and riding off, nor could he tell how many enemies might be in the house. Maybe Ollendorf and the whole crew were at hand. But he had to make a stab at it for his position was unbearable.

He passed the outside hearth, lay by it for a while, then inched to the base of the log wall not far from the door. Now he drew his Colt. Blackie's voice was startlingly close as the segundo said, "Shucks, I can't get back to sleep at all. What'd you wake me for?" A match was struck and its glow lit the interior.

Jarris came up, gun raised, and peeked in. The segundo was lying on his side in a bunk along the far wall, the match flickering as he held it to a cigaret end. Sam, his comrade, holding a double-barreled shotgun, sat on a three-legged stool, watching.

"Hold the light, Blackie!" ordered Jarris sharply, and hopped through the door on his good leg.

SAM THREW up the shotgun but Jarris lifted his thumb. Sam screamed once; he toppled, and his body made a dull thud on the floor. Blackie squeaked like a cornered rat, and his violent start shook out the match.

Jarris slid along the inside wall, brushing it with his left hand. Blackie had stupidly kept the lighted cigaret between his lips. "Bob!" gasped Blackie. "Don't—don't shoot me!"

Jarris found the thick-topped table and pushed it over. The crash alarmed Blackie; he suddenly realized about the cigaret and hurled it away; it lay smoking on the boards. Jarris picked up a pan he had touched and threw it across the room to see if Blackie would fire at the sound. "Bob— cut it out," begged the segundo.

Jarris heard the rustling of the grass mattress, scrabbling noises as though Blackie might be trying to dive under the bunk.

"I'm coming for you, Blackie," said Jarris in a sepulchral voice.

He tossed a tin plate which had been on the upended table. Still Blackie didn't shoot. "I can see you, Blackie," lied Jarris.

The segundo squeaked. "Don't shoot, please don't shoot me, Bob! I had to go for you, or Dirk would have killed me."

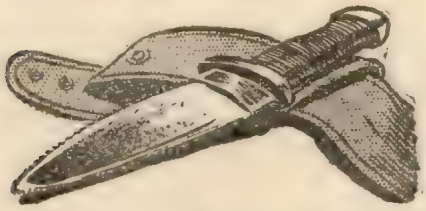
"Light a candle or I'll drill you," threatened Jarris.

After a brief interval, during which he could hear Blackie moving around,

the segundo struck another match. The growing flame showed his sharp face, his red-rimmed eyes as he peered in Jarris' direction. His Colt lay on a bench near the head of the bunk and there was a candle in a metal stick. "Touch that off, pronto," ordered Jarris.

He had the segundo, and knew Blackie was a coward. The segundo would attack from ambush, or from the rear, but he wouldn't dare fight it out eye-to-eye, gun-to-gun; he feared Jarris.

Gun trained on Blackie for effect, Jarris stood up and stepped toward his prisoner. "Who else is around?" he growled, making it tough to impress the segundo. "Don't lie to me; I'll get you if you do."



The candle flame showed Sam on the floor, the shotgun where it had fallen. Blackie's eyes saucered as he stared at his dead mate and he gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his scrawny throat.

"Where's Ollendorf?" demanded Jarris.

"He's at the ranch, but he aims to head for Silverton tomorrow." Blackie's teeth rattled.

Jarris limped over a grim, stained figure. He took hold of Blackie's shoulder and put on pressure. The segundo winced from him. "Why'd you say I killed O'Brien?"

"I—Dirk made me, so help me." Blackie hated pain, couldn't stand the thought of it.

"Who *did* shoot O'Brien?"

Blackie gulped but renewed pressure from Jarris' strong fingers made him say, "Dirk done it, I saw him. We called O'Brien outside and he come into the woods. Dirk let him have it, said we could blame it on you. Then we fetched the marshal up."

"Why did he kill O'Brien?"

"He wanted him out of the way; he didn't trust him no more."

"What happened to Christine and her mother?"

"Dirk took the kid with him. The old lady run off into the woods, and we let her go."

JARRIS glared sourly at his prisoner. "What's Dirk done to Louise Lees?"

"Nothing—yet. He'll make her hitch up with him, though."

"He hasn't touched her, has he? If he has I'll rip off his hide inch by inch," said Jarris savagely.

"Well—he didn't hurt her that I know of, though he did put on the screws about you."

"You mean he didn't believe I was Bob Tilman?"

"That's it. The way you shook us really worried him. Dirk decided you must be more than you claimed to be. She wouldn't tell him nothing, though, that he didn't already savvy. Say, who are you, anyway?" Blackie's curiosity overcame his fear for a moment.

"I'll ask; you answer. You say Ollendorf's going to town?"

"That's right, to see some hombre there."

"What for?"

Again the hesitation, again a show of force loosened the segundo's tongue.

Then Jarris asked, "Is Anson in cahoots with Ollendorf?"

"Well, they're friendly. But he don't savvy much; he believes what we told him, about you."

"What was that, besides that I killed O'Brien?"

Blackie gulped; he was fearful about explaining and it took more vising on his shoulder. Then, "Dirk sent Dave in and told the marshal you'd smothered old man Lees. So Anson come out to hunt you down, Dirk furnished the posse."

"A fine hombre, your boss,"

growled Jarris. "I come in mighty handy around here to blame things on; I'm surprised he wants to get rid of me."

The sarcasm passed over Blackie's trembling head. "You ain't going to plug me, are you, Bob?"

"Not yet, not if you do like I tell you. How many head of cattle did you boys rustle off the Red River ranges?"

"Three thousand in seven months. But there wasn't enough in it, Dirk claimed."

"Who downed that line-rider over there the Z Bar man?"

Blackie didn't hesitate this time. "It was Dirk. That waddy come up on us while we were working."

The segundo had surrendered completely and he talked freely. Jarris, alone and dragged out, meant to drive on.

11

IN THE LATE afternoon, the huckleberry train ground to a halt, the engine's bell stack spouting clouds of black smoke and cinders. The train seemed weary, glad to come to rest at Silverton, end of the line. Loafers and small boys were on hand to rubber at the travelers dropping off the high step of the passenger coach, while the station and freight agents were outside, shirt sleeves gartered up, as they took care of their consignments. The telegraph operator, a green eyeshade on, leaned from his window at the side of the little station.

At the back of the mixed train a freight car door slid back and an extra large young man in cowboy garb jumped down. A second one, much like the first, pushed from the straw-littered interior a wide unloading plank with cross cleats so horses would not slip in descending. Two mustangs were brought down, saddles chucked forth and cinched on. In no-time flat the two big fellows were riding up Silverton's main thoroughfare.

Marty Jarris watched from the small square window in the side wall of the livery stable. His face was drawn, blood-drained under his coat of tan. But he had shaved and cleaned up, put on a fresh gray shirt and a new bandanna. Blackie, the Double L segundo, drooped dejectedly on a soap box behind him; any idea of bracing Jarris had long since evaporated from Blackie's crushed soul.

It had been a hard ride for Jarris, through the dark forest trails, across the wide valley and into the settlement. But Blackie knew the local paths and was now eager to assist in return for his life, and for the good word Jarris had promised to put in for him. They had reached town before dawn, on Double L mustangs belonging to Blackie and the defunct gunhand, Sam. Jarris had rented a small storeroom at the rear of the livery stable and after tending his wound, he had slept, with Blackie thonged nearby, although the segundo swore he had no idea of trying to escape.

Night was near at hand; already lights were on in the *Road to Ruin*, and other amusement-centers. Music and voices rose in the honkytonks. The stable boy brought in a hot meal and a pail of steaming coffee for Jarris and his prisoner, and they consumed it, smoking later on as they waited, waited.

When dark had fallen, Jarris went out, with Blackie in tow. They crossed the plaza, keeping in the shadows. Blackie pointed at a square brown house across from the *Road to Ruin*. "That's Ruth Young's place; she's Dirk's sweetheart."

Half an hour later, Jarris slid up behind Ruth Young's. Lamps burned inside, and the plush curtains made the light rosy. Jarris looked into the kitchen where a colored cook was busy over the cookstove. He quietly

moved on around the darker side and then stopped short. In a small bedroom, seated in a chair by the table. sat Christine O'Brien in a red dress trimmed with silver spangles. The pretty young girl was watching the closed door into the hall. Her dark hair was pinned high, a bejeweled Spanish comb thrust into a side bun. She looked more adult, with her lips thickly powdered and rouged, but her large eyes had a wide, frightened expression in them. As Jarris watched, she licked her full coral lips, and a decent man's righteous anger burned him at this disposal of O'Brien's daughter. No doubt, Ollendorf had arranged it—to be rid of a troublesome witness; Christine might have seen too much when her father had been shot.

HE TIPTOED on. Soon he came to the dining room, with two windows opening on this side wall. Between the wind-stirred plush curtains Jarris could see the dinner party. Ollendorf, his hair slicked back and gleaming in the lamp's glow, was at the white-clothed table. A lean, handsome man of around forty, gray touching his sideburns, sat opposite Dirk and there were two females present. One was a small, vivacious woman with painted cheeks and black hair, while the other was a redhead. Both were gaily dressed. From what Blackie had told him, Jarris knew the little one was Ruth Young, Ollendorf's town woman; she was very pretty, but had the somewhat-brassy look of such women.

The party was very gay as they drank and ate. "Oh, Mr. Thompson!" the redhead kept gurgling in response to the lean guest of honor's sallies.

Jarris moved off. He had things to see to, but as several Double L men were around town he had to move cautiously, keeping out of sight.

•

It was eleven o'clock before the private dinner party broke off and from a dark vantage point Jarris watched Ollendorf, trailed by his retainers, ride out of Silverton and hit the road home. Jarris went over to the *Road to Ruin*. It was easy to ascertain the number of Kenneth Thompson's room on the second floor. Jarris reached it by an outside staircase at the rear of the large, rambling structure.

He tapped, standing at one side. "What is it?" called a man inside.

"I have a message from Mr. Ollendorf, sir," said Jarris.

In a minute the bolt slid back, and Thompson, in his black trousers and white shirt, his feet cased in carpet slippers, looked out, a hand on the knob. He didn't seem worried at the late visit, and Jarris shoved in without waiting for an invitation. Thompson stepped back, his cheeks turned a bit red; he started to object but Jarris pushed him into a chair and kicked the door shut behind him.

Thompson had been drinking heavily, but he could hold his liquor. He was alarmed now at Jarris's brusque manner, and his eyes slid to the Colt at the intruder's hip. Jarris looked tough enough for anything. "What is this, a holdup?" demanded Thompson.

"No, sir," said Jarris coolly, standing over him. "I just want to know what you told Ollendorf."

"What are you talking about?" blustered Thompson; "that's our business!"

"You're wrong there; I've made it mine." Jarris stepped in and let Thompson feel the steel in his fingers. He wasn't sure yet about the man.

"Who you operating for, the New Orleans syndicate?" growled Thompson.

"No. Who are *you* working for, besides yourself?"

"As if you didn't know," sneered Thompson. But, as Jarris scowled most inpleasantly, Thompson added hastily, "There's no harm in telling you I'm an agent for the North Texas Company."

"Did Ollendorf send for you?"

"Not exactly. I was scouting through here and stopped at the Double L one afternoon. Ollendorf talked to me and told me to meet him here in Silverton for a conference. Is there anything wrong with that?"

JARRIS was checking on Blackie's information; he was beginning to believe, from Thompson's reactions, that he was dealing with an essentially honest man.

"Do you realize that Ollendorf killed his employer, Lewis Lees, on account of all this?"

Thompson looked scared, and bit his lip. "I—I heard that Lees had died. I didn't know—" He stammered with fright. "I had nothing to do with it, I assure you, sir. Are you a Texas Ranger?"

Jarris only shrugged, moodily; he didn't like answering questions. "What did you tell Ollendorf when you first met him here in town?"

"I told him my company wouldn't pay a dollar without a proper legal conveyance; Lewis Lees was the actual owner of all that property."

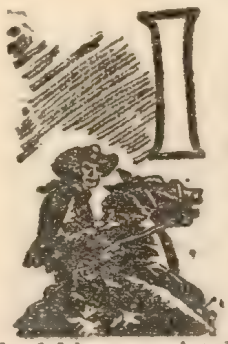
"So I figured it. However, with Lees dead, your outfit would have accepted his daughter's signature, since she's Lees' heir."

"That's correct."

Inwardly, Jarris was growing more and more pleased. He had amassed a great deal of evidence against Ollendorf, even though he had lost a first-class witness in Vance O'Brien. He was skillfully fitting each piece of the puzzle into place. Nothing else gave the true manhunter such intense satisfaction as this, when he could inexorably close in and pin his man, bind the taut chains of the law around the quarry. It was a savage instinct, that of a tiger taking its prey, but it was fortunate there were such as Jarris, who let nothing stop them in their pursuit of predatory raiders such as Dick Ollendorf. It was beautiful the way every little move, every bit of action, puzzling by itself, took on significance as part of the main picture.

As Jarris spoke further with Kenneth Thompson, he became convinced that basically the agent was an honest man who would not go beyond the accepted practices of his calling. His contact with Ollendorf, so far as Thompson went, was legitimate business.

12



IT WAS around two A. M. when Marty Jarris, limping a bit, approached the Double L. He had left his horse on the other side of the river, flitted across the bridge in the pale moonlight and made it on foot. He had his two pistols and carried a loaded carbine.

The buildings were dark, but Jarris knew that Ollendorf had been keeping a night-guard out. He waited, under a shade tree, until he saw the rider's shape against the sky. The horseman was moving in a wide circle around the buildings. As the sentry passed behind the long barn, Jarris quickly loped to the yard. He wasn't sure whether Ollendorf was in the bunkhouse, or in the main structure; Dirk had been sleeping in with his crew but he might have switched over. Above all, Jarris wanted Ollendorf.

Eager, but keeping cool as the end of his long manhunt came in view, Jarris went to the kitchen, lifted the latch, and went in. The house was quiet; he moved through the hall to the living room. He checked the small office to the side; it had but one window and he jammed the sash, using a penholder from the desk as a wedge. In the corner on that wall he could command the door into the main room; they could not shoot him from outside without leaning through

the window. For frontal cover he eased the desk over.

A hole ready to dive into, Jarris checked his guns for the last time. He left the carbine in the corner, and, returning to the living room, struck a match and lit the lamp on the center table. Then he went out on the front porch and waited until the circling guard came into sight. The sentry glanced over but took no alarm as to the light; no doubt he thought the women had made it.

Jarris raised a Colt and fired a shot over the rider's head.

The explosion echoed sharply in the night over the moonlit range. The Double L man, hearing the whir of lead, uttered a warning yelp, and digging in his spurs, rode hell-for-leather around the house.

Jarris went back into the darkened office, picked up the carbine and waited in the corner. He could see a large section of the living room through the open door.

The first one in was Dirk Ollendorf. The manager had on leather pants and a flannel shirt. His feet were bare, his head uncovered for he had been roused from sleep at the alarm. In a hairy hand he gripped a large Colt, the spur back under his thumb. He stopped, looking suspiciously around before stepping into the empty living room. He had come through the dog run, from the far wing, and the hounds were baying uneasily.

Jarris kept quiet. A couple of Dirk's men, one with a double-barreled shotgun, appeared from the kitchen wing. Then Jarris heard Louise's anxious voice, "Dirk, what's wrong?"

"Nothing much," answered Ollendorf. "Go on back to bed, honey. You might get hurt."

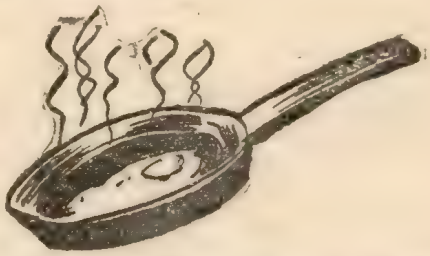
"Hey, Dirk!"—That was the sentry singing out to his chief. "You in there? Somebody took a shot at me from the porch."

"Who was it?" called Ollendorf.

"I dunno. Couldn't see much of him. I think he went back in."

A couple more sifted through, one reporting, "Nobody around we can see, Dirk."

Ollendorf was puzzled. He scratched his jaw, and let the pistol's weight drag down his gun hand. "Keep hunting. That pistol didn't go off by itself." He slowly crossed the room as Jarris watched, and stopping in the center of the floor, glanced over at the unlighted office. He turned that way and took a step forward.



He was broadside to the doorway and only a few feet away when Jarris spoke up: "Here I am, Dirk."

IF OLLENDORF had had on boots he might have jumped out of them at sound of the cold voice. His Colt flew up and he fired into the office. The bullet splintered the top of the desk, and plugged into the wall behind Jarris, crouched down. Jarris shot back with the carbine, aiming just over Ollendorf who dove off, shouting hoarsely to his friends. The shotgunner pulled a trigger in the excitement, and the spreading buckshot lashed at an angle through the door, some pellets kicking up the floor, others hitting the wall.

Ollendorf was now out of Jarris's sight, and bellowing excited commands. "Get around outside and plug him through that window! ...You George, hook to the front and see he don't get out that way. ...Go back, Louise, I told you!"

Jarris heard her worried tones, "It's Marty, isn't it? Don't kill him, please don't, Dirk."

"Marty?" squeaked Dirk.

"I mean—I mean Cousin Bob. Don't kill him."

"You mean you lie like hell,"

shouted Ollendorf. Jarris heard Louise give a sharp cry. "He ain't your cousin, is he? You crossed me. He come here after me didn't he?"

"Let go!" She must have slapped him for Jarris heard the smack of a hand on flesh. "He came here to help me because of the way you were acting, Dirk."

"You're loco; he's a blood-money manhunter, a damned eyeballer, that's what he is. He killed your old man—I told you he did."

"I never believed it—Marty, be careful, they're coming around, watch the window—" Her frantic warning was cut off.

Jarris heard a door slam. Then gunshots banged, and he kept down behind the heavy desk. He fired through the window pane and the glass tinkled as it fell. Shouts and explosions filled the air.

Harsh, discordant noises came to Jarris, calm in the hole he had fixed for himself. He was listening, waiting for a change in the hubbub. Somebody near the office window shrieked frantically, "Dirk—Dirk!" but stopped it short. Confused calls, more staccato explosions, rose in the immediate yard.

Jarris got up, knowing the time had come. He glided along the wall to the living-room door. The lamp still burned on the table. Near the closed door at a rear corner stood Ollendorf. He wasn't looking Jarris's way, but, his forehead corrugated, was staring toward the side, listening. Then he roared, "George! Inky!"

Nobody answered him and the shooting stopped as suddenly as Jarris had started it. Ollendorf whirled, reaching for the doorknob, but Jarris jumped into the living room, the carbine levelled. "Hold it, Dirk; drop your gun."

Ollendorf shuddered. He was quick, not only physically but in mental reaction, and he knew he was either dead or taken. He let go of his heavy Colt and it rattled on the floor; he put up his hands before turning to face Jarris. His sullen lips parted but he didn't say anything as one of the large young men from Silverton, herding three pale-faced, gulping captives ahead of him, pushed in from the kitchen. Now the young man wore a silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers.

"All right, Renny, we got him," said Jarris. "Where's Porter and Blackie?"

"Coming in from the other side," answered Renny. "They got most of the others—what can still walk." The Ranger leaned against the wall and watched.

"YOU DIDN'T think I was fool enough to come out here alone again, did you, Dirk?" asked Jarris curiously. "I wired for a couple of Rangers—served with 'em for three years, you know, and we often work together. They pulled in on the train from Tyler this afternoon. Blackie led 'em out behind me. I was afraid—afraid you'd light out if you got wind of it in time, so I hustled in to hold you down. I didn't want to lose you."

"Affectionate, ain't you?" snarled Dirk. "What do you want?" But he knew; there was animal fear in him, his lips trembled though he tried to hide it. He kept licking them, and the fascination of the hunted for the manhunter was a deadly one as his eyes riveted to the grim Jarris.

"I'm working for the Red River ranchers you raided, Ollendorf. You killed one of their line-riders. O'Brien would have sworn to it but you downed him. However, Blackie's turned state's witness. We have Christine, she was up on the bluff near home when you shot her father and she saw what you did. Louise and I saw you kill that other cowboy from the Z Bar that night in Silverton. You smothered out what life was left in Lewis Lees, I'll swear to it...." With deep relish Jarris offered the iron-clad evidence gathered against Dirk Ollendorf.

Dread twisted the star captive's face. He gulped, as though he could already feel the harsh caress of the

hemp that Jarris had inexorably twisted around his throat.

"The rustling was a disappointment, wasn't it?" went on Jarris, enjoying his triumph. "It didn't pay the way you'd hoped. Then you killed a man, and you panicked, because you're afraid of the law. You were in the prod about it and went from bad to worse to protect yourself. You'd have run away, but you had met Ken Thompson, the field-agent for the North Texas Company. They were willing to pay a fortune for the timber in the Double L hills. Thompson told me all about that. There was to be a sawmill set up at the falls near O'Brien's, the trees trimmed there and the logs floated down the river to the railroad. The money Thompson offered made your mouth water, and you couldn't bear to give it up—come on in, Porter."

The second Ranger entered behind two more crestfallen, disarmed prisoners, one with a limp, bleeding arm, the other with a swelling mouse over his eye, where a gun barrel had rapped. Porter had innocent, pale-blue baby eyes, but he was just as tough as his comrade. Blackie came dragging along. The segundo was licked, and refused to meet Dirk's hot, accusing glare.

"You couldn't give that lumber-outfit a concession, because you're not legal owner of the land," went on Jarris. "And as long as Lees was in the condition he was, nobody could; it wouldn't hold good. But with Lees dead, and his daughter your wife, you could have cleaned up—only you had that killing on your mind."

The door behind Ollendorf opened and Louise Lees, her face pale, stepped in.

JARRIS instantly saw the danger. Ollendorf didn't fail to seize his chance, though it meant using a woman as a shield. He knew they wouldn't fire if there was any danger of hitting the girl. He grabbed her arm, pulled her in front of him and backed out. Dirk shoved Louise into the living room, whipped a Colt from a holster hidden under his shirt, and jumped out of sight.

The Ranger up front, in two long bounds, was at the window, his head and shoulders thrust out.

"No, Porter!" howled Jarris, but the roaring guns cut off his talk. Two explosions seemed joined.

Porter sagged back, but it was only a scratch across his ruddy, boyish cheek. Jarris ran over, swearing to himself; he rushed past Louise, into the area in front of the dog-run. The hounds yelped frantically, straining at their chains.

Ollendorf lay there on his face, his head smashed by the heavy bullet. Jarris kicked away the still quivering manager's gun, spurning it in disgust. He swung back, frowning severely at the pinked Ranger who was mopping blood from his chin with a kerchief. "You're too damn quick on the draw, Porter. He couldn't have got away from me. I wanted him alive. I could have killed him any time I felt like it; now the best case I ever made up is wasted."

Louise stared at Jarris. She seemed to see him in a different light and there was repression in her manner as she said, "So you did come here after Dirk!"

He nodded, thinking of the terrible trail he had had to travel, of the dangers involved, of his near escape from death.

"For the blood money!" he heard her murmur.

The Rangers busily whistled as they made sure of the prisoners. Blackie had dropped into a chair and sunk his head in his arms. Acrid powder smoke slowly drifted out the windows.

Aunt Emmy, in a gray wrapper, her hair done up in curlers, padded in. She cried, "I never, we got company! I *thought* I heard something."

Jarris started to Louise. He wanted to tell her many things, of his anxiety about her and how, if it hadn't been for her, he would have operated in a much safer manner.

She turned and went out when she saw him coming.

Jarris stopped short. A coldness came over him. "Let's go, boys. We'll run these men to the town lockup. They were all in with Ollendorf."

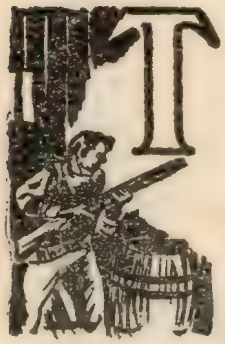
Fifteen minutes later, Jarris rode away from the Double L. Ahead, nearing the bridge, were the Rangers and Blackie, the captives lashed on horses and lined together with ropes.

Jarris had been last to mount and he let his horse drift slowly after the procession. When he had made a hundred yards he pulled up and looked back over his shoulder.

Somebody was standing there in the moonlight, staring after him. It was Louise, and Jarris felt his pulse quicken with hope at sight of her.

WESTERN JUSTICE

Fact Feature by Harold Gluck



THE LAWS of the first settlers in Western territory were few and to the point. The men wanted to keep law and order, and when constituted legal authorities were not on hand the settlers took care of things in their own way. Nice legal points did not hinder them from seeing that "Justice was Done."

Two thieves, by the names of George Ruspas and David Reise, stole a yoke of cattle at Chinatown and drove them to Washoe Valley. The price at which they offered the animals was so low that they were at once suspected of being thieves. The men were arrested and it was immediately shown that the animals had been stolen from Mr. Campbell's ranch. The sentence of the jury was that these two men should have their left ears cut off, and then be banished from the territory.

The trial was held under a big pine tree near the western shore of Washoe Lake at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Jim Sturtevant, an old resident of Washoe Valley, was appointed executioner. He drew out a big knife, ran this thumb along the blade, and—not finding its edge just to his mind—gave it a few rakes across a rock. He then walked up to Reise and taking a firm hold on the upper part of the organ designated by the jury, shaved it off at one single slash.

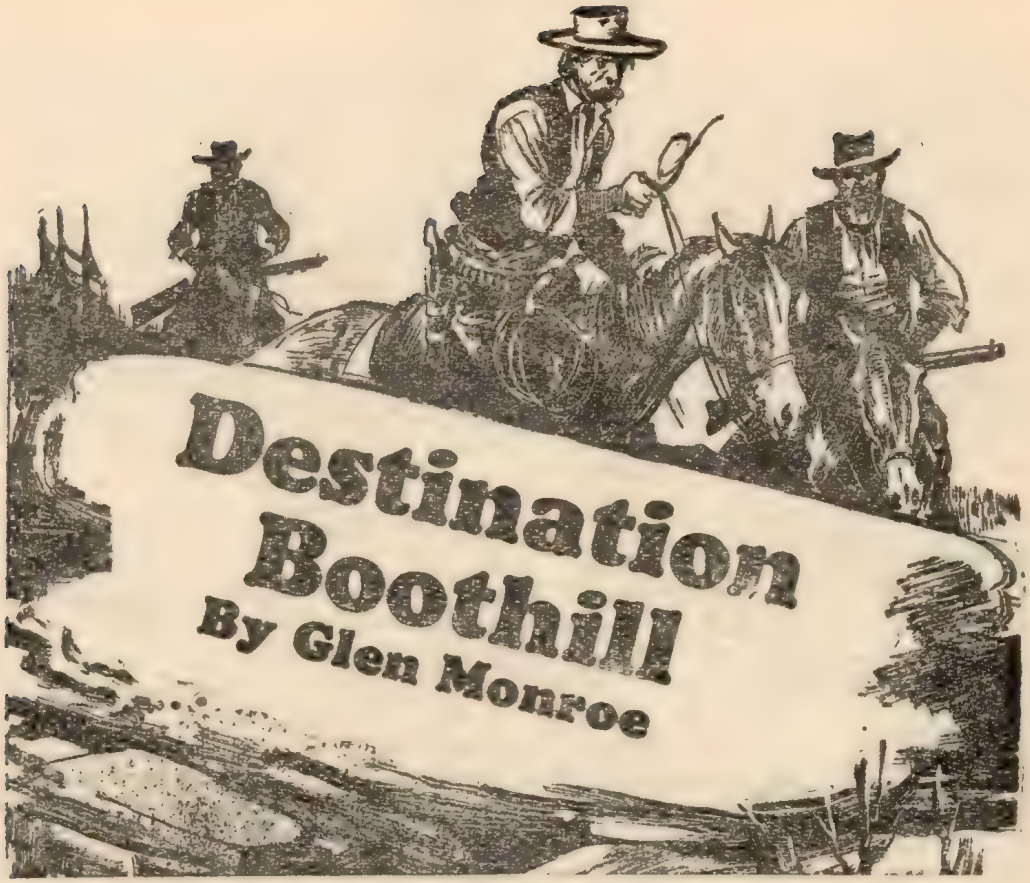
As Jim approached Ruspas the face of that crook was observed to wear a cunning smile. He seemed very much amused about something. The executioner meant business and tossed Reise's ear to the jury. Then he grabbed hold of Ruspas who wore his hair hanging down to the shoulder. He pulled aside Ruspas' hair and was unable to carry out the sentence. The left ear was missing! Perhaps on some similar occasion it had been removed.

The Honorable Executioner was in a fix; his instructions were to cut off the fellow's left ear but there was no left ear on which to operate. Ruspas began to laugh aloud. The sentence couldn't be carried out.

Jim Sturtevant appealed to the jury for further instructions, and they said they would reconsider the verdict. Two minutes later they beat Solomon and his decision: "An ear is an ear. Since the prisoner hasn't a left ear, take off his right ear."

The smile faded from Ruspas' face and there was a vigorous slash of the blade. Jim tossed that ear to the jury with the comment, "Seems to me you now have a pair of ears."

This little ceremony of Western Justice being finished, the two thieves were directed to take the road leading over the Sierras and pay California a visit. They promptly obeyed, and the good citizens went back to their daily tasks.



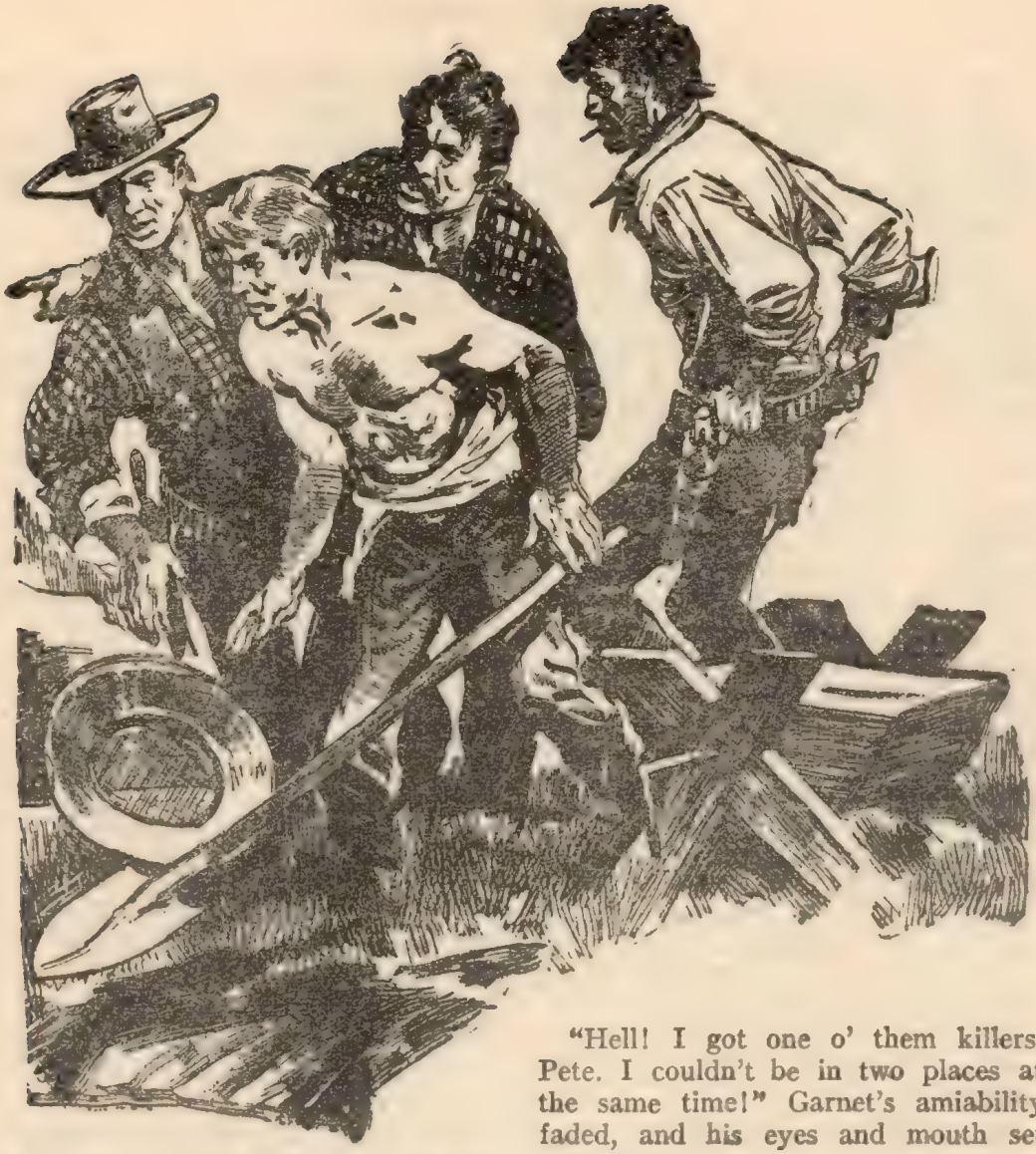
Pete Shelby was ready to comfort Harriet Bonner as well as he could, and to avenge his friend, Bill — Harriet's late husband. But Shelby wasn't ready for Harriet's willingness to sell out her claim to the Bonner mine for a trifling sum, and resent Pete's attitude!

Feature Novel of Murder's Mine

HE STOOD at the end of the town's main street, his brow furrowed, his heart heavy as lead. He shaded his eyes against the cold brilliance of the mountain sun, looking for a sign of the incoming stage. A knot of people stood outside the stage company's office, but he knew it would not yet have arrived, for he had deliberately set out to reach Monarch early.

Starting to walk forward again, more slowly this time, he muttered, "A hell of a thing..." and added, a few paces on, "A hell of a thing for a man to have to do!"

The high false-fronts, and log walls of Monarch's stores and saloons rose up beside him, as he drew nearer the centre of the town. Sheriff Ed Garnet stood outside his office, leaning on



the gallery handrail, watching the idle traffic, occasionally letting his eyes follow a group of miners in their progress along the street. Then he noticed the newcomer, and his eyes fixed on the man's set, sad, determined face.

The sheriff called out, "How do, Pete?" and when the man did not answer, but just kept walking with his gaze fixed on some point far ahead of him, he added, "You still feeling bad about it?"

Pete Shelby swung round then, eyes blazing. "He might have been alive today if you hadn't had your fancy pants glued to your seat at that faro table, Garnet."

"Hell! I got one o' them killers, Pete. I couldn't be in two places at the same time!" Garnet's amiability faded, and his eyes and mouth set defensively.

"Jake Fallon got away," Pete said harshly. "And you only got Sid Doyle after the killing."

"Now look here; be reasonable, Pete. I came out soon's I heard the shot. What more could I do?"

"Fallon and Doyle had been in the town a good hour before the shooting started. The whole town knew they were in. It was your job to rope them in. You preferred to go on playing faro."

Garnet flushed. "I didn't know they were in till I heard the shot, and came out, and they started shootin' up the street," he said quietly.

"All the town knew Fallon had arrived. All but the Sheriff," Pete Shelby said heavily. "Bill Bonner's blood is on your hands. I'll not forget that, Garnet."

Shelby had nothing more to say to the sheriff. Garnet, feeling uncomfortable under this tongue-lashing, was seeking words to excuse himself, but as he saw Shelby's wide back turned on him, he changed his mind about answering Shelby's hot accusation; and stood with his hands clenched at his sides, and his long, lean features stiffened in silent anger.

Shelby passed a corner and crossed a side street where it intersected the main street. A girl came out of the shadow of the opposite corner and approached Pete, stopping him. His features didn't relax. He gazed stonily down at her. She started to put her arms about his neck and drew back as he stiffened, avoiding her embrace.

In a low, hard voice he said, "Not now, Susie. Another time."

The girl was thin, lightly dressed; she fell back from him without spirit, turned and ran back to the corner building, which was quiet now.

He was getting near to the stage company's office, and there were more people moving about the street and standing expectantly on the boardwalks, gazing along the beaten trail that wound in from the north through narrow defile of Monarch Canyon, some three miles out of the town.

The sick emptiness in Shelby's stomach was intensifying as his unwelcome task drew nearer. Men gave him curious glances as he passed by. It was unusual for Pete Shelby to ignore a friend; the customary smile in his eyes was replaced by a dead, hard stare. It was so unlike Shelby's normal self that Gus Monson, standing in the doorway of his store, remarked to a passing customer: "He sure is takin' it bad after a week's gone. . . ."

"They was fine buddies, them two," the other man said, and they both stared at Shelby's retreating back.

He slowed his steps as he came level with the wide-fronted log hotel. Shading his eyes again, he looked along the trail, but still there was no tell-tale flurry of dust. He paused at the foot of the steps leading up to the wide verandah in front of the hotel, then turned and climbed swiftly to the entrance door. In the vestibule, a clerk sat on a high stool behind a short, recessed counter; a scratched leather armchair stood opposite; a narrow, boot-worn strip of carpet covered the floodboards leading to the staircase; otherwise the hotel's entrance was bare of furnishing.

Shelby said bleakly: "You have a single room? Fit for a lady?"

The clerk looked up, his expression showing his mild surprise. He said, "Yes, Mr. Shelby. When would you be wanting it?"

Shelby glanced at the clock at the back of the counter. The midday stage was already five minutes late. He said abruptly, "Now. I'll pay a week's advance."

"What name shall I. . . ?"

"Never mind now. I'll be back," Shelby said.

His ears had caught the blurred clatter of horses' hooves, and the sharper sound of the rolling wheels was already announcing the arrival of the stage.

Pete Shelby hurried out to meet Bill Bonner's widow.

WHIP CRACKING, horses snorting and stamping hooves against the hard, resistant ground; a creaking of shafts, a grinding of axles; a yell from the driver as he gave his last, careless flick of the whip, the cry of, "Monarch! Stretch your legs, folks!" the gun-guard sheathing his Winchester, and swinging stiff-legged down the seat beside the driver. The southbound stage had arrived.

In the midst of the buzz of talk

from the bystanders, Pete Shelby watched Harriet Bonner step out from the Concord. As she found her feet on the ground, Shelby saw her eyes come quickly round, searching the crowd, an eager expectancy on her face. She passed him by after a light, swift glance, and he saw the eagerness fade, and his own stomach knotted as he knew that now he must break the news to her.

He remembered Bonner's shy description of her, and at once Shelby knew that his friend's diffident phrases hadn't done her justice. She was slender, the effect of which was heightened by her pinched-in waist and wide, flowing skirts, but there was no look of frailty about her. Like Bonner, she was a child of the soil; their families were Kansas farmers.

"She's got brown eyes, an' naturally red cheeks, a wide, soft mouth, an' a strong chin. She'd have her way when she wanted to," Bill Bonner had told him. "She's got a big sort of nose, too, but it fits her somehow."

Looking at her, Pete Shelby noted the individual features, remembering his friend's words, but more than that he noticed that in spite of the strength and a certain plainness in her features she was beautiful. He wondered if it was the expression in her eyes.

He checked his thoughts and stepped forward abruptly, lifting his hat. "Mrs. Bonner?" he asked, and when she replied he told her who he was.

She smiled at him, holding out her hand. "Bill used to write about you," she said. "I suppose he's too gold-hungry to come and meet me."

"Gold wouldn't have stopped him coming to meet you," Shelby said very quietly.

A shadow struck her face. "Is anything wrong—? Is he hurt—?"

"He's dead." The sickness in his stomach was like cramp now. She couldn't hide the pain and horror of it. Her eyes opened wide like a wounded deer's, then stared down at her feet in an attempt to hide her suffering. Looking up at him again, her lips formed the word, "When—?"

His voice trembled slightly, he couldn't help it. Then he told her all she needed to know, repeating the story he'd gone over in his mind a hundred times during the long-drawn days of the past week.

"It was an accident." Shelby choked on the words for all his rehearsing. "Last Friday, Bill came in for the stores. Usually we tramp in together. I had a job to finish. Told him I'd follow him in and meet him at Brooks' for a feed. When I got in, round about this time, I heard all about it." Shelby paused miserably. As he spoke he was seeing it all again, blaming himself for having delayed his trip, knowing that if the two of them had come to town together the whole course of events might have been different, knowing that they'd most likely have been in a different part of the town when the shooting had started.

Pete bit his lip and went on: "A couple of owlhooters—stage-robbers, claim-jumpers, real bad hombres—had hit the town during the morning. They started loosing off their guns, and...Bill got cut down. He died at once. Shot through the heart—"

Harriet Bonner took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "What happened to the outlaws?"

"The one who killed Bill was shot down. His name was Sid Doyle. The other one, Jake Fallon, got away. The Sheriff got Doyle." He stopped an impulse to say that Ed Garnet had been huddled over a game, and that he could have been out and rounded up the two outlaws before Bonner had been shot, but he knew it wouldn't help Harriet.

Her face was suddenly very soft. Then she tightened her mouth, and Pete saw she was holding back tears.

NOW THAT they were quiet, he noticed the crowd again, heard their

whispered gossip, and he realized he must get Harriet into the hotel. He took her arm, picked up her bag which the driver had dumped at her feet, and led her of the roadway to the boardwalk. He left instructions with the stage company's agent to send the rest of her baggage, which consisted of a flat wooden box-trunk, to the hotel.

The clerk stared at her as she came into the vestibule ahead of Pete Shelby. When she signed her name in the hotel register the clerk went pop-eyed, and he said nervously, "Mrs. Harriet Bonner!"

The look Pete gave him cut off any unwelcome questions. Handing Pete the key, he said, "First floor. Fifth door on the right."

Wordlessly, Pete Shelby took the key and led Harriet to her room. He set the bag down beside her bed, then murmured, "You've had a shock, Mrs. Bonner, getting a welcome like this. I guess you'll be catching the next stage back home—"

She lifted her face to his, and it was stripped now of all its color. She gave a slight, helpless shrug and sat on the edge of the bed, saying nothing.

At the door, Pete said, "Anything I can do for you while you're here I'll be surely glad to do. Bill was my best friend."

"Don't go, Pete," she said swiftly. "Bill. Where is he buried?"

"Out of town. In the Boothill."

"I'd like to see where he's buried," she said in a small voice. "Do you mind if we go now?"

"Could you eat or drink anything? It's a long stretch from Ubet—"

"Some coffee, maybe, later. I couldn't eat—"

He knew what she meant, and he nodded. They left the hotel and he walked beside her out of the town toward the square of green sod that was marked with crosses and, here and there, a headboard, to mark the last resting place of those citizens and voyagers who had died in Monarch County.

When they returned to the town, Shelby took his leave of Harriet Bonner at the entrance of the hotel. He said gravely, "You'll want to see the mine tomorrow, I guess?" When she nodded, he added, "I'll be in to call for you at sun-up." He smiled softly. "You'll want a pair of pretty stout walking shoes. It's a rough trail—"

He stood out in the street watching her lonely figure slowly climb the hotel steps.

HIS DAY'S duty was done and he hadn't the stomach to return to his solitary mine diggings up in the hills, there to spend the rest of the day and long evening thinking of his friend's death, of the misery of his newly-arrived widow.

He took it as granted that she would take the next stage back to her home town in Kansas; Monarch, at the height of its mining-boom, was no place for a woman to live alone. But she would have to wait five days for the stage coach to make her return journey.

This was a town like a host of others that had mushroomed during successive gold-rushes—a town of shifting population. Bill Bonner had worked his mine for six months only, and Pete himself hadn't staked his claim more than a few weeks earlier, but the two men struck up a quick and firm friendship a few days after Bonner's arrival. And because they had shared so much together, Pete had taken the responsibility of caring for Harriet while she stayed in Monarch.

Thinking of Bonner's first arrival here, Shelby recalled that his mine had already been in operation when he, Pete had struck gold. An old man owned it, and he'd come to a mysterious death. He hadn't been a sociable neighbor, and Pete had hardly seen him from one week's end to the next; but when the old man disappeared for a whole month, Pete made a few casual enquiries, and learnt that no one had seen him for that month. Another week later, a prospector re-

ported finding the old man's body, smashed almost beyond recognition at the base of a high cliff. The old miner's death didn't cause a stir in Monarch County; everyone who'd known him considered he'd blundered over the cliff's edge in the dark of night, or when he was blind with forty-rod.

Pete wasn't questioning that opinion. He was just faintly disturbed at the coincidence; both owners of the mine had met a violent death during the course of six months.

The old man had been a Bonner, too. After his death had been discovered, there was talk in the town of auctioning his mine, which was showing itself to be one of the richest in the county. It was rumored that powerful interests were moving behind the scenes to buy the mine at a bedrock price. And then Bill Bonner turned up, produced a letter from old Seth Bonner, who'd been his uncle, deeding the mine to him, and the transaction had been verified by the best-known legal house in Helena. Bill Bonner satisfied Sheriff Ed Garnet that his title was clear, and Bill installed himself as the legal owner of the mine. The Bonner mine, they called it now in Monarch.

Walking slowly, Pete reached the entrance of the *Lucky Strike* saloon. The sun was dipping behind the crest of the mountain range which, west of the town, built up to the Great Divide a few score miles away, and he was glad enough to get inside the warm, log-walled room; men stood drinking at the bar and others sat at tables placed at intervals over the rest of the space.

Without interest, Pete gazed about the room, noticing Sheriff Garnet sitting at a table with another man. This was Marcus Dillard who owned the saloon, and the hotel, and had a big interest in a mining investment company in Helena. He was a gambler and his eyes held that shrewd, narrow glint which often accompanies such men. For the rest, his hands were pudgy, even though his fingers were nimble and quick; his hair was thin, greying slightly, on a round head, and his face was smooth, clear-complexioned and shiny. He was a shade under six feet in height, but looked enormous by virtue of his belly, and the thick flesh across his shoulders and chest.

As Pete crossed the floor, Garnet spoke a few words to Dillard, then rose and walked quietly out of the saloon.

Rusty Brown, the bartender, gave Pete a smile of sympathy. "How's she takin' it, Pete?"

Shelby looked at him in some surprise for a moment, and then realized that Harriet's arrival must now be common news in Monarch, and he said, "Well as you can expect, Rusty. It's hard on a girl, especially when she's come this far."

"Sure. Kansas folks, ain't they?"

"Yeah," Pete said shortly. "A bottle of rye, Rusty; I want to forget the set-up for a while."

"Sure. Sure is tough."

A glass appeared on the counter, and the bartender produced a new bottle of whisky, poured out the first slug. Pete said, "Thanks, Rusty," and slid the money across the counter. Pocketing his change, he settled against the bar to submerge himself in the liquor.

A HAND STRETCHED out beside him and knocked the glass to the floor.

Pete Shelby started round in surprise. A dirty-looking man stood beside him. His clothes were shabby and rough, his face stubbly, sharp-nosed and ugly-mouthed. He wore a gun-belt that held a gun on each hip. Over his shoulder, Shelby saw another man backing up the intruder. They were both strangers.

Shelby controlled his irritation and said, "That's all right, pal. There's plenty more." He looked at Rusty, who was watching the scene anxiously. Rusty produced another glass and stepped back again. Carefully, Pete toed the glass splinters away from

where he was standing in front of the bar, and poured himself another drink.

The stranger reached out again and tossed the glass to the floor.

Shelby swung on the man. "Who the hell are you, and what's your game?"

The man bared his faintly yellow teeth and spat. "The name's Ike Lewis, feller; can't you take a hint?"

"If you want a fight," Pete said heavily, "you're going the right way about starting one."

Ike's eyes narrowed. His hands brushed the tops of his guns, and then he waved a hand round the room.

Ike's companion, behind him, had moved slightly to one side now, on the alert. Shelby, throwing a quick glance about the room, picked out at least six other men on their feet, looking stonily at him, with guns hung at their waists. A hush crept over the saloon as the other men in the place began to understand what was afoot. Pete was unarmed.

Ike Lewis murmured, "Git, feller. The deck is stacked against you. Pack up your bags and hoist out o' this town; I don't want to see you around no more."

Shelby tested his weight on his toes, flexed his hands and wrists, and bunched fists and stepped in. His first lunge connected square with Lewis' jaw, rocking the gunman back on his heels, slewing him along the edge of the bar.

A split second later the room exploded with lead and powder-smoke. The mirror behind the bar cracked and splintered in a dozen places, showing round, black holes where the bullets had ploughed in. Drinking-glasses shivered and smashed, littering the floor at the back of the bar. More slugs crunched into the solid woodwork behind Shelby, but the shooting was mostly wild, the gunmen trying to scare the place rather than hit Shelby. In the confusion and the uncertain light, they were afraid of hitting their leader.

Savagely, Pete went after Lewis, who was shaking his head in an effort to clear the daze from his brain, his hands groping ineffectually for his guns. Shelby hit him with a straight left in the chest, making the gunman grunt and wheeze. A vicious swing with his right followed up to the side of Lewis' face. The gunman's eyes were staring with a bright malice, and his mouth was tightened in rage and pain. But his arms came up, his hands spread out to shield his face.

THIS WAS the moment Shelby wanted. He leapt in closer to the gunman, his left hand shooting forward, grasping the slack in Lewis' shirt-front, bunching there and dragging the man toward him. His right hand went deftly for Lewis' gun, yanked it clear of the leather and cocked it on Lewis' belly.

"Turn around!"

Ike's hands wavered up over his head, and he turned as Pete slackened his grip on his shirt-front. Shelby whipped out Lewis' second gun and tossed it behind him over the bar counter.

Breathing hard, Pete called out to the rest of the gunmen: "Make a false move with your hardware, hombres, and this two-bit tough-hand gets his. Savvy?"

Lewis' face was twisted with angry pain. "Do what he says, fellers," he spat. "You'll wish you was in hell before I'm through with you, hardrocker," he snarled back at Pete.

Shelby looked for Ed Garnet, about to ask him if he was going to stand for this sort of thing in Monarch, but he noticed now that the sheriff had gone. Marcus Dillard had left, too, sometime during the ruckus.

He said at last to Ike Lewis: "This is a warning, whoever you are, whoever paid you to put on this game, whatever that is. I'll be toting a gun around from now on, and if I catch a one of you two-bit rough-housers along the sights, I'll send you to hell and back. I'm telling you this time, Lewis.

I don't want to see you around anymore, and Monarch don't want you either."

Pete fastened his left hand on Ike's greasy collar, pushing him forward to arm's length. Then he lifted his heavy, studded, flat-heeled boot and lunged hard against the seat of the gunman's pants.

Lewis let out a howl as he was suddenly jerked forward, and he went smashing into a table and set of chairs close in front of him. He only just saved himself from cartwheeling right over the table.

Shelby said crisply, "Remember what I just said," and walked slowly, watchfully, to the door. He took one last look and then let go the catch on his gun and walked out into the darkening street.

The sound of his name being called out made him stop sharply. He listened as quick-moving footsteps came up to him, and he recognized the owner of the voice coming out of the grey shadows of that early evening. She had a coat thrown over her shoulders now against the keen edge of the night wind. He said, "Susie!" and knew a slight, remorseful pang as he remembered how tersely he'd dismissed her that morning.

"Pete!" she said again, thankfully. "I heard the shooting in there and I wondered..."

There was wonderment in his eyes. He said tenderly, "You were worried about me?"

"I love you, Pete," she said.

He was silent for a moment, and then he said quietly, "How did you know I was mixed up in that shooting?"

"Ed Garnet came along just now, and asked me if there was anything more between you and Bill than just friendship. I told him, 'Not that I know of,' but he didn't seem satisfied. He kept hanging around me asking me what I knew of Mrs. Bonner. I didn't even know you were going to meet her today, Pete."

"What made you think I was in the shooting?"

"Well, I asked Garnet why he wanted to know all them questions, and he said, kind of airily, 'There's a bunch of hoodlums just hit town askin' for Pete Shelby and Bill Bonner.' I didn't believe him, until I heard the shooting."

Her voice throbbed as she spoke; she was breathing gustily as though she'd been running, and he could see a light reflected in her eyes.

For a moment he would not meet the challenge they held. His only thought, which he voiced aloud was: "Bill Bonner's death was no accident!"

2

AS UNDERSTANDING broke on him with a force of a cloudburst, he turned away from Susie and ran back along the street toward the hotel.

He brushed past a man as he mounted the steps, and realized when he reached the vestibule that the man was Marcus Dillard. He hadn't time for speculation. He ran up the stairs, halting at the fifth door on the first floor. He knocked urgently and soon the door opened.

Harriet Bonner gave him a level stare. "Hallo, Pete," she said. There was a subtle change in her manner which registered in Pete's mind, but he did not immedieately take heed of it. To him, the discovery that Bill had been murdered, and that the same forces who desired the Bonner mine were still at work, was a matter of such urgency, that it outweighed all other considerations. He saw now that Harriet's life could be in danger.

He blurted out: "I've got some important news, Harriet. Do you mind if I come in so we can talk it over?"

She held the door open wide, saying nothing.

In the centre of the room he gazed down at her, phrasing the words in his mind before he spoke.

"Harriet, Bill's death was no accident!"

She was startled out of her composure. "How do you know that?" she asked sharply.

He explained the chain of circumstances that had led him to his belief, recalling that old Seth Bonner had been conveniently disposed of by means of an "accident," telling her that powerful financial groups had been trying to buy the Bonner mine at that stage, and remembering then that several times since Bill had taken over the mine, there had been strange "accidents" taking place. Once a boulder slipped on the mountainside and narrowly missed pulverizing Bill, another time, a charge of explosive had mysteriously detonated early, showering him with rock and chips of rubble, cutting him about the face and head. And, now that Harriet Bonner had arrived in Monarch as a possible claimant to the mine, a gang of strong-arm gunslicks had tried to ease Shelby out of town.

Pete said rapidly, "The sheriff of this county is mixed up in it somewhere. Maybe he's the man on the spot who keeps these other people posted with events. Maybe he's the real murderer."

"Why are you telling me this, Pete?" Harriet asked quietly.

Pete looked surprised. "Why? Well, I reckoned you might want to get to the truth of Bill's death. After all," he added, faintly irritated, "he was working the mine so's he could make a comfortable home for you."

Harriet flushed, compressing her lips. "I thought maybe you were trying to get me to stay on here."

"You make your own mind up about that, of course," Pete said, a little stiffly.

SHE SMILED suddenly and held out her hand. "You're thinking of Bill, and you want to be good to me, I know. I was bewildered this afternoon, didn't know what I was going to do, and you helped me get over the shock."

"I thought," Pete said slowly, "that if you knew that Bill had been murdered, you'd want to stay and fight back. But mostly I wanted to warn you that whoever hired Bill's killer, is still after the mine and won't stop at murder to get it."

"I don't have to worry about that any more."

"But the mine belongs to you now, Harriet."

She nodded and smiled faintly, and then averted her eyes. "I'm taking the next stage back east," she said.

"That's five days ahead; plenty can happen in that time," Pete said grimly.

"I don't think so," she said, turning away and going to her bag. "Not now."

A quick suspicion struck Pete Shelby. "Has Marcus Dillard been to see you?"

"Yes," she said. "Here; this is the contract. I've sold him the Bonner mine."

Pete could hardly believe his ears. "Is that all Bill's work meant to you?" he asked sharply. "He was murdered for the sake of that mine, and you don't even want to have his murderer tracked down?"

"Didn't you say the man who shot Pete was killed?"

"He was just a hired killer! The man who hired him is a double murderer, maybe more!"

"And am I to spend the rest of my life hunting someone I don't even know? There's more to life than revenge, Pete. It's all over now, isn't it? I couldn't bring Bill back to life, whatever I did." Her lips trembled. "You won't make me stay, whatever you say! I've had enough—more than enough—to do with that mine.

It's no good to me, and I'm going back home."

Pete Shelby stood stunned before her outburst, and could find nothing to say.

She was calmer now, and she said quietly, "Thanks for what you tried to do for me, Pete. I think you'd better go now."

Pete stood silently staring at her, trying to understand what had made her sell out the mine, but he could not. At last he shrugged and said coldly, "Bill Bonner was my friend. If you, his wife, don't care who killed him, I do. I'm going to find who it is who organized the shooting. And when I do I'll pay him back in full for what he did to Bill. There's still a lot of us, Mrs. Bonner, who like to pay their debts."

"A debt of death!" Harriet Bonner said bitterly.

"Yeah," Pete Shelby said grimly. "But remember it's a debt. It's something you pay back!"

He turned his back, and went angrily through the door, swinging it shut behind him, yet not slamming it.

When he had gone, Harriet Bonner listened to his footsteps disappearing along the passage, heard them quickly descend the stairs. Going to the window she watched his lean, grim figure cross the street, tramping toward the *Lucky Strike* saloon.

For a instant the light, falling on his head and wide shoulders, seemed to reflect back to her the power of his uncompromising stubbornness, and she was disturbed.

She turned away from the window, her mind divided, and went again to the table where her bag lay. She turned over the contract of sale of the Bonner mine, and read Marcus Dillard's pencilled address on the reverse side. It took her a long time to make up her mind. Eventually she knew what she had to do.

She threw a coat on, tidied her hair, and went quickly out to the street. She turned towards the town's outskirts, heading for the address which Dillard had given her.

When at last she came to it, she was startled by its size and the pretentious grandeur of its turrets which loomed large in the night sky, impressing her even though she couldn't see the full extent of the building. She was half-afraid as she walked up the drive to the monstrous entrance porch. Her heart was pounding heavily as she tugged at the bell-rope, and heard the massive sound from the interior.

A man opened the door to her. There was no light behind him, but she had the impression of a roughneck standing there. Falteringly she told him she wanted to see Marcus Dillard.

"Does he know y'are comin'?"

On the spur of the moment she said, "Yes. Tell him it's Harriet Bonner."

She was aware that the man's attention was suddenly snapped full on; she could imagine his eyes staring, riveted to her.

"This way," he said. "I'll take you

THE ROOM she entered was brightly lit. Brackets of candles stood on the table, which was set for the middle of a full course dinner; overhead, hanging from the high ceiling, a galaxy of kerosene lamps blazed.

Marcus Dillard jumped to his feet, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. His guests, two men, remained seated until Harriet walked through the door. They rose with icy aloofness, with their eyes first staring coldly at her, and then switching enquiringly to Dillard.

Harriet had never been embarrassed so much before in her life. "I could have waited..." she murmured uncomfortably.

"What do you want?" Dillard said thinly, his eyes on the nervously-clutched sheet of paper in Harriet's hand.

"Shelby just came to see me after you left, Mister Dillard....."

"That's a legal contract, Mrs. Bonner. You accepted eight thousand dollars cash for the sale of the Bonner mine."

"I know I did," Harriet said, trembling.

"Well?" Dillard was peremptory.

"I—I don't know what Pete Shelby is going to do. I just wanted to tell you that I'm standing by this contract. I'm taking the next stage back east. So whatever Shelby does, he can't hurt you, and I want you to know that I've got nothing to do with whatever he does."

Dillard cast a look of thinly-veiled smugness at one of his two guests. He said softly, smoothly, "You see, Blackwood; the deal is closed."

"Very satisfactory," Blackwood said. His voice startled Harriet Bonner; it was a voice as dry as the dust that collects on old documents in a legal office, but it was the accent that most surprised her. It was clear, sharp as a knife, faintly sarcastic, highly-educated English. It all added to the unreality of the moment.

Harriet ended lamely, "Shelby won't do anything. He was Bill's friend. You won't hurt him, or get him into trouble with the law?"

"You know," Dillard said pensively, breaking in at the end of her halting words, "it might be more comfortable for you if you stayed here until the stage is due, Mrs. Bonner. Monarch's hotel isn't the best."

"But..."

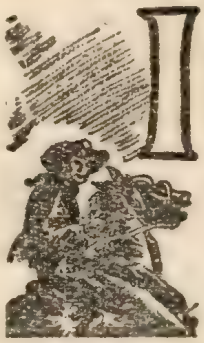
Dillard waved a hand. "The housekeeper will look after you. You are my guest, Mrs. Bonner."

She mumbled her thanks, as the attendant led her out to meet Dillard's housekeeper.

When her back was turned, Marcus Dillard looked at Blackwood again, and this time his smile was frankly triumphant.

Vernon Blackwood, City of London financier, cleared his throat and said dryly: "Isn't it astonishing how much human sentiment you find buried in a gold mine?"

3



IT DIDN'T make sense to Pete Shelby, reared in the tough, hard-riding fellowship of the Western States, that Harriet Bonner could journey all the way to a remote mining town in Montana, prepared to face all the difficulties of a new life here with her husband; and then, finding him dead, simply discard all that Bill Bonner's work had accomplished. Pete hadn't even asked the amount that Dillard had paid her, nor did he care; he knew the figure wouldn't approach the value of the mine. Fiercely he wondered if Dillard had threatened her, but he rejected the idea as soon as it came, knowing, in spite of himself, that Harriet Bonner had readily agreed to the sale. He couldn't understand her, but he knew that it wasn't in her to fight back.

He'd left the hotel savagely determined to find Dillard and have it out with him. But after a few angry paces he'd realized the futility of that course. It was a legal transaction. What leg had he got to stand on? There was nothing to prove to anyone, other than himself, that Bill Bonner's death had been deliberately planned.

He slowed his pace, buttoning his windbreaker tight across his chest against the keen edge of the mountain air, which pressed down mistily on the town; making the lights dim balls of yellow, capable only of throwing narrow lines of illumination on to the sidewalks, and the street between. The mist hung down on the flats, making him long for the mountain slopes where he'd made his home.

Above him, where the outskirts of the town lay, he could see clear, twinkling lights, and the glistening ground.

A voice hailed him before he knew he was near Sheriff Garnet's office. Shelby halted and turned reluctantly. Garnet stepped out of the shadow of the sidewalk, and Pete started suddenly at the sight of a glint on something metallic in the Sheriff's hand. Garnet came closer, snatched Shelby's gun and his voice spoke harshly now. "Get inside, Shelby!"

Pete cursed softly. Now he had no gun, he could see no way of wresting the weapon from Garnet's hand.

"So you're in on it, are you?" Pete said heavily.

"Talk when you get inside," Garnet said thinly. "Get!"

Pete went slowly inside the lamplit office, and pulled up short on the threshold, as he saw the man sitting in the corner of the room. The sheriff's gun jabbed him in the back, forcing him to go on.

"Showing your hand now, Garnet?"

The man in the corner came heavily to his feet, and his hair seemed almost to brush the beams in the ceiling—hair that was bushy and dirty and stood up stiffly like wire. The same sort of hair grew straggly-fashion from his chin, adding to the impression of his immense height, which must have been close on seven feet. He carried weight, too, for he was broad across the shoulders and he looked big-boned. Great high cheekbones stood out starkly on his face, and above them a pair of big, dark eyes glowed with a kind of animal brightness. His long arms dangled beside a gun-belt filled with two six-guns, and a row of spare cartridges, his knotty hands spread out as he started to speak. Anyone in Monarch would have told you that this man was Jake Fallon, killer, claim-jumper, outlaw, a man with a price upon his carcass. And here he was, in the sheriff's office.

"You'd oughter plugged him out there. You'd of been safe in the fog tonight, Garnet."

"We've had enough killin' for that mine, Jake," Garnet said. "I'm handlin' this deal, don't forget."

"You're crazy," the big man growled, his voice deep inside his barrel chest. "Don't you know Shelby's kind? They ain't spooked easy, an' you can't buy 'em with all the gold in Montana."

Pete smiled faintly. From an enemy, this was a compliment.

GARNET looked uncertain, and he scowled at Fallon's remark. He stared hard at Shelby as he spoke. "You heard what Fallon just said. He figures you're too stubborn to do what's best for you."

"What's that?"

"Quit interferin' with the Bonner mine and get out of Monarch."

Pete shrugged. "Who said I was interferin' with the mine? Whoever it was, he's a liar. Bill Bonner was my friend and I stood by him—just as I'll stand by his wife so long as she needs me."

"No one aims for you to do any different," Garnet said, nodding. "Mrs. Bonner has sold out, I hear, and she's ridin' out on the next stage back east. I don't want trouble with the new owner if you got some foolheaded notion about Mrs. Bonner's keepin' on with the mine..."

"I was wondering when you'd get to that," Pete murmured. Fallon's eyes burned at him, but the big outlaw said nothing, and Pete ignored him.

Garnet snarled, "My job is to keep order in this county. If you stick around you'll only cause trouble. I'm givin' you good advice, Shelby. Pack up your things and pull out. I can't hold him back nor anyone else after tomorrow." He jerked his hand towards Fallon as he spoke. "You know what to expect if you stay."

"Sure, sure, I know now," Pete said

bitterly. "One time I thought you, being Sheriff, would give me some help in tracking down Bill's killer." He glared at Fallon. "This hombre was in on it. Why ain't you holdin' him? He'd be a sight less trouble to you behind bars!"

"You're goin' to be sensible, Shelby? You're goin' to pull your freight?" Garnet persuaded.

"Yeah," Shelby said, "like this!"

He had been tensing for this moment, coiling up like a spring ready to unleash all his strength. The attention of the two men had been gradually lessening throughout the conversation. Shelby was in a corner now where he had to say "Yes" or "No" and there was only one answer he could give.

He sidestepped quickly, one hand slashing at the gun in Garnet's hand. The sheriff drew his hand back convulsively, but failed to get it clear of Shelby's vicious swipe. The gun twisted and went off, the slug hitting the wall. At the same moment, Shelby drove his fist at Garnet's face and ducked. Fallon let out a roar and went for his gun. He palmed the sixer in a lightning draw and a couple of slugs sizzled past Shelby's head. Shelby straightened and went hard at the sheriff, who'd been staggered by the first blow.

Garnet backed away, swinging the Colt around to bear on Pete once again. Pete danced around him, keeping him in front of Fallon so that the big outlaw couldn't get another shot at him without first dropping the sheriff. Garnet's gun slewed and belched flame. Pete was still moving and he just cleared the slug, but then he saw Fallon, and the outlaw triggered in that same instant. Pete felt the burn of the slug, but he wasn't hit. He bent over and straightened up, lunging towards Garnet again. His hand darted forward and rapped the sheriff's wrist. Garnet's gun went off, tearing a groove in Shelby's forearm.

Pete jerked his arm back, but came on in a charge. His left fist bunched and swung against Garnet's throat, sending the Sheriff back on his heels, making him stagger back and sideways, off-balance. Pete's left followed up to Garnet's gun hand and wrenched the gun free before the sheriff could recover from his surprise. Shelby's right arm was wet with blood now, but he had enough strength left to take the gun in his right hand; with his left he gripped Garnet's shirt front and dragged the thin-framed sheriff in front of him, holding him once again as a shield.

Fallon had shot and missed while Shelby was tackling Garnet. Now he shot again, grazing Garnet's shoulder, making Pete jerk his body sideways to let the slug whirr past his neck.

Pete backed towards the door, dragging Garnet with him, keeping a watchful eye on the Sheriff to be ready for any sudden move to escape on his part.

"What's it all mean, Fallon?" Shelby breathed. "Who is it that wants the Bonner mine so bad they won't stop at one murder to get it?"

"That's somethin' you'll never know, hombre."

"I'll know it now, or you'll never live to tell anyone," Pete said heavily.

Fallon's big eyes slitted. "You can't get out of this, Shelby. You're in a jam and the odds are against you..." He crouched as he spoke, and at the end of his words he shot at Pete.

Garnet yelled in terror and pain as the bullet tore through his left arm. "Quit shootin' at him, Fallon! You'll plug me!"

Shelby slung back an answering shot, but Fallon was already throwing his bulky body sideways to the floor, putting the table between him and the flaming six-gun.

"I'll find out what this is about," Shelby said savagely, "and when I do I'll settle my accounts with you reptiles!"

As he shot at the lamp he gave

Garnet a shove with the heel of his hand and a kick in the belly. He stepped quickly backward through the door, and as he did so, Fallon let go a stream of lead around the table from his position on the floor.

The light was fading and dying; glass showered to the floor. And as Shelby turned to run out to the street he heard the dying scream of Sheriff Ed Garnett.

Garnet shrilled, "You hit me,—Jake—" and then his voice trailed off into a gasping sob. Shelby heard a liquid cough, and Fallon's harsh laugh, and the outlaw's stumbling feet crossing the room, heard the window of the office flung open, and Fallon's voice bellow into the thin fog outside: "Hey! Shelby's killed the sheriff! Stop 'im makin' a getaway! Hey!" The words were repeated over and over.

SHELBY slipped down the steps, thrusting the empty Colt into his belt. Fallon had reloaded and was firing into the night to attract attention. Yellow orbs of light like glow-worms danced closer through the fog. Shelby heard running footsteps. Then Fallon quit firing, and Pete guessed the outlaw too was making his get-away.

A burly figure lumbered close to Pete and he could see a shotgun clasped in the man's arms. Quickly he dodged into an alley separating two buildings and disappeared into the black shadows.

He had to feel his way carefully to avoid stumbling over garbage and raising a din by kicking the heaps of empty tin cans littering the ground, and when he reached the back of the line of buildings, he turned and followed the direction of the street, back toward the livery stable, where a fresh team of horses was kept for the stage.

Swiftly he let himself in through a gate in the fence, went to the back of the stable and entered it. He felt the presence of the horses and heard their faint whickering. He spent some minutes anxiously groping for the ladder leading up to the hayloft even though he knew the inside of the stable; he dared not strike a match, and the darkness was like a wall in front of his very eyes. Noiselessly then his feet found the treads and he let himself into the hayloft. In a far corner he dug a hole in the hay, crawled into it and went to sleep.

Outside, voices shouted, "Where's that son, Shelby? He done murdered the sheriff!"

"Aw, stuff! I don't believe it!"

"He sure did. They had a scuffle in Garnet's office. Shelby left his wallet behind. Must of been torn out of his pocket in the fight. It's plain as a pikestaff!"

Another voice called out, "Don't let the snake hightail. He done plugged the sheriff in the back!"

"Lynch him!" roared a mob of voices.

After that the din faded and dispersed. Monarch was hunting Pete Shelby.

4

THAT NIGHT in the casino, Ike Lewis made an unexpected conquest. He sat with Ede Nelson, a brawny, burly member of his gang, drinking and breathing in the heavy, smoke-filled atmosphere, his eyes fixed on the girls performing on the dance floor. At the end of the dance, he nudged Nelson's elbow and pointed to a girl in the troupe now walking from the floor.

"That's the dame I want to see, Ede."

"Yeah? All right, too!"

Ike grinned briefly, showing his ugly teeth as he stood up from his chair. Nelson gave him a slow wink

and a leer, and went on gazing at the girls while Lewis started threading his way through the tightly spaced tables and chairs lining the dance floor. He was a dirty, shabby, unwashed looking little man, his clothes sweat-stained and greasy, his boots run down, and his face always dark-jowled, as though he were always unshaven. A pair of guns slung against his hips added to the rest of his appearance, made it clear that Ike was a professional gun-toter. Generally speaking, he wasn't popular with girls; and he had no illusions about his chances of success in getting to know this girl, who was less brassy in her looks and manner than the average among percentage girls.

He called out awkwardly, "Miss..." as the girls filed past him toward their dressing room. Three or four pairs of eyes turned on him, and inwardly he was cursing, feeling the desire to whip out his guns and stagger the whole casino with his dash and bravado. Outwardly he stood fidgeting uncomfortably before he blurted out her name, addressing the girl he'd had his eyes on during the dance.

"You're Susie Dellows?"

"That's right," said Susie, and the other girls, laughing and shrugging as if they were saying, "Good luck, dearie, but I don't think much of your choice," went on through the door of their dressing room.

Ike said, "You feel like a drink, and maybe sit and talk awhile?"

"Sure, I'll come with you. I'd be glad to." She gave him a quick friendly smile, and Ike lost his fears, a sudden warmth surging through him, making him full of confidence now, where before he'd been all diffident and hesitant.

Ede Nelson's eyes were on them as they wound across the floor to an empty table near the wall, his mouth curving wickedly. Lewis winked at him and then sat opposite Susie at the table.

"Liked your dance," said Ike, by way of an opening.

"Thanks," Susie said.

"The name's Ike," Lewis grinned at her. She repressed a shudder and smiled back at him. "Seems you know me already," she said.

"Sure," Ike smirked. He dropped his voice a tone. "I've heard you're pretty friendly with that guy Shelby. Kind of sweet on him."

Susie flushed even though she'd been waiting for him to mention Pete somehow. "Pete and I are good friends," she said softly. "What are you driving at?"

Ike's sharp, beady eyes drilled into her. He was weighing up just how much he should say, and how much he should leave out. He decided to tell her about the ruckus with Pete in the *Lucky Strike*. "Seems I got things turned upside down about Shelby," he said confidentially. "The sheriff hired me and my boys to come in and clean up the town." He patted one hipped gun. "Garnet's got a yeller streak. He don't like throwin' lead for fear it might bounce back on him. He told me two guys was causin' all his trouble—Shelby and Bonner.

"Waal, me and the bunch hit town and what do we find? Bonner's already in Boothill. We tackle Pete Shelby and find he ain't the sort of customer we expected. He don't look like no owlhooter to us, and he don't act like one. So I fancy Garnet's up to some sort o' game. If you ask me it's somethin' to do with Bonner's mine."

Susie listened carefully, wondering how much of the story was true. She said, "I reckon you've got the truth about the mine. Ask anyone in Monarch, and they'll tell you Bill Bonner was murdered while Sheriff Ed Garnet sat playing faro. He was too yellow to get out and rope in the two hardcases that killed Bonner, or else he'd been paid to sit tight. I don't know which is the truth of that.

After the killing he went out and got one of the murderers. Shot him dead in the street."

Lewis murmured, "I figure he's that yeller-bellied his shadow'd make a sheet of iron look like it was gold. Does Shelby own any part of this Bonner mine? Heard it's plenty rich."

"You say Ed Garnet paid you to do a job for him. Why not ask him?" Susie said mildly.

"Hell, he ain't paid us yet! Only give us an advance. I don't trust the hombre. I wanted to get your ideas about the set-up here to check up. Come on, sister. You got nothin' to lose. I ain't gunnin' for your man any more. I want to know how I can get one back on Garnet."

SUSIE STARED straight into his bird-like eyes, listening intently to the persuasive talk, trying to understand what the gunman really wanted out of her, and what his game actually was. She toyed with the glass in front of her, wondering how far she could string him along, how much she should tell him. "This is all I know, Ike," she said at last. "Someone wants the Bonner mine so much they'll murder until they get it. I guess whoever it is has got a lot of money, and I guess the mine's worth a lot more to them. But they killed Bill Bonner to get that mine, and Bill Bonner was Pete Shelby's friend. Pete won't rest now until he's squared accounts with Bill's killers." She was watching Ike's face narrowly, waiting to see the foxy little gunman's reaction.

Ike Lewis' face was stony hard. He nodded. "Yeah. I'd sorter worked that out for myself. That's what I wanted to know. Bonner's wife hit town today, I heard. She'd be the owner of the mine now, I reckon."

She had a ghastly feeling inside her when he said his last words. But she didn't say anything, and gave only the slightest of shrugs. The piano and the two piece string band was playing a lively dance rhythm, but it sounded to her like an annoying buzz in the background.

Lewis grinned. "Don't get me wrong, baby. I just wanted to know what kind of of a game I'd bought into. Looks like high stakes on both sides! Come on, let's dance."

"Uh-uh!" She shook her head as she stood up. "I've talked too much already!" She dodged round the table and ran for the door on to the street. Ike stared after her and scowled until she disappeared among the crowd, and then sauntered back to his previous table where Ede Nelson still sat, now gazing at his leader and leering cynically.

"Wipe that grin off your face, cowboy," Ike grunted. "You figure I scared the girl away? Well, you're wrong, see? I been findin' out some information about this Bonner mine. What the girl said tallied with a hunch I got, and I reckon I know somethin' she don't. She's gone a-hightailin' like a fool to the hotel to look up one Mrs. Harriet Bonner."

"Yeah?" Nelson asked vacantly. "What's she doin' that for?"

"Never mind, stupid. Swallow your drink and get movin'. We got work to do!"

"Want me to rustle up the rest of the boys?"

"Nope," Ike grunted, and then changed his mind. "Yeah. Tell Art to pass the word around. If anyone wants to know where you and me were tonight, we were in here all the time. Get me?"

"Sure, boss."

Ike Lewis waited for him at the door, and then, buttoning their coats high at their necks to keep out the mountain cold, they pushed out into the misty night.

SUSIE PAUSED in her flight when she reached the street, and shivered slightly. Wisps of fog floated past her, the chill dampness of it penetrating her body. After that brief moment of pause she started running

again, across the street, slanting northward towards the hotel where Harriet Bonner had a room. Breathlessly she enquired the room number of the sleepy clerk at his desk, and ran on up the stairs.

By the dim light of the passage she found the right door, halted and knocked urgently. Standing back, she saw that there was no light showing under the door, and a doubt struck her. She knocked again, loudly and insistently. She was breathing hard, and felt the pounding of her heart as she waited impatiently, moving from one foot to the other, staring at the unresponsive door panels and glancing up and down the passage.

Faintly she heard the sound of shooting. She knocked again, thumping the door with closed fists. She put her ear against the door and heard nothing. With sudden panic she wondered if Lewis had prearranged a signal with one of his gang so that she was already too late. Had Harriet Bonner already been kidnapped while Lewis had been talking? Or was Pete Shelby perhaps entertaining her this evening?

Outside the shooting became louder; it sounded in the street now. Then the street filled with people shouting and she heard feet running past the hotel. Alarmed, she gave one final knock on Harriet Bonner's door, and then went quickly to the end of the passage where a tall, narrow window looked out on to the street. Lights were bobbing up and down and men were shouting, but she could not distinguish the words. She wondered if Lewis and his gang were responsible for the disturbance, and she drew into the shadow of an alcove; she was expecting Lewis to make an attempt to get at Harriet Bonner, who was now, she thought, the key to possession of the Bonner mine.

Minutes dragged slowly by, and she was about to emerge from the alcove when she heard heavy feet treading the passage, then halting. A door handle turned, but there was no telltale following squeak of the door's hinges. The door handle turned again and again, and she could feel the irritation of the newcomer as the door did not budge. She heard a savage, throaty curse muttered under the man's breath, floating like a whisper along that quiet, sinister corridor.

Susie moved slowly and silently towards the corner of the alcove until she could catch a glimpse of the passage beyond. She caught her breath when she saw the man, and saw that he was standing outside Harriet Bonner's door. The man she recognized was Jake Fallon.

She kept perfectly still until he gave up trying to get into Harriet's room. She knew that he could have shot the lock away had he wanted to, but obviously he was trying not to draw attention to himself. As Fallon started to walk away, Susie crept away from the wall of the alcove and slipped along the passage behind him. She let him get down the stairs before she reached the head, and then flew down to the hall and she was only a few paces behind him as he swung roughly from the hotel step into the dark, foggy street. Silently she followed him.

Fallon lumbered on ahead. She kept his massive frame just in sight, but she had no difficulty in hearing the regular tread of his boots in front of her. Fallon was making for the edge of the town, trudging along with great, loose, swinging strides so that she had to break into a short run every now and again in order to keep pace with him. She was grateful for that, though, for it was the only way she could keep warm; her thin dancing dress was pitifully inadequate against the raw cold of the mountain air. Presently the town's buildings thinned and she was in open country.

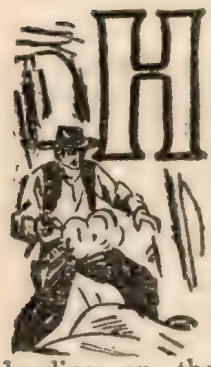
When Jake Fallon stopped and turned into the driveway of one of these houses, Susie stopped a moment, surveying the land. She knew that this was Marcus Dillard's extravagant mansion, and she knew now

without a shadow of doubt that Marcus Dillard was the man behind the scenes, the man who had ordered the murders connected with the Bonner mine.

She entered the long driveway, seeing a lighted window on the ground floor of the house way ahead. Fallon's boots crunched on the gravel. To avoid making a noise herself she found the edge of the path and stepped off on to a soft grass verge which, however, was broken in places by projecting spurs of rock so that she still had to pick her way carefully. Now she was interested only in reaching the house and finding out what Fallon had to report.

She heard a heavy door open and close; and then there was silence.

5



HARRIET BONNER, felt as if she were living a nightmare as she followed Dillard's housekeeper through the spacious hall and ascended the broad treads of a gracious, winding staircase to a dark landing on the first floor. All the woodwork was dark and heavily carved, so laden with dust it would take an army of servants a year to clean up. The ceilings were high and stately, but depressing because of the darkness, and the housekeeper made no move to light lamps.

But it was no part of Marcus Dillard's intentions to scare Harriet. He wanted to impress her, certainly, and awe her into submission by the very magnificence and grandeur of her surroundings. Apart from that, Dillard had nothing to gain by asking her to stay; so when the thick, heavy door of her own room was opened and after she'd waited on the threshold while the housekeeper went inside and lit the lamp, she had almost a shock of surprise at seeing how comfortable the room was. The furnishings were thick and opulent, and the massive four-poster bed was curtained with rick, silky, colorful material. Walking in, she floated on the top of a soft carpet, then sat in an expensively-carved armchair. All around her, the room glittered with glass.

. A wave of comfort surged over her, and her mind was almost tranquil. Only she couldn't remove the impression of fear she'd had when the servant had opened the front door for her, nor the awareness of hostility towards her on the part of Dillard and his guests. She'd never forget that strange, English voice as long as she lived, and now she was confronted with Dillard's housekeeper. "Strange people all around him," she thought.

The room was ready for her, and the housekeeper, who had kept an almost perfect silence since she had first appeared, spoke to her.

"Your nightclothes are on the bed, Mrs. Bonner," she said in her sour voice. "I'll have your own things sent up from the hotel in the morning."

"Thank you," Harriet said in a voice strangely unlike her own. Dillard had certainly succeeded in his purpose.

The housekeeper was a thin woman with a sunken, lined, long face, her eyes set deep on each side of her bony nose. Her eyes fixed on Harriet in an uncompromising stare. "You'll find the closet through that door," she said. "You must not wander about the house at night. Mr. Dillard does not like that. Especially when he has important guests." She snapped off her words in brittle sentences, in a manner so commanding that it brooked no questioning.

Harriet nodded meekly. "I understand," she said quietly.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Bonner," the woman said sharply, and left the room with a rustle of starched skirts.

Harriet relaxed in the chair, feeling limp and worn out. And, although her mind was whirling with uneasy

questions, she fell asleep at once.

SHE HAD no conception of the time when she awoke with a sudden start. She hauled herself from the chair and crossed to the window. Looking out, she could see the vague impression of the mountain range printed against the skyline, and above it the dark sky dotted with stars. The ground was still dark and fog-blanketed, and she couldn't make out anything on the ground directly below her. She was used to the room now and it did nothing to lessen the fears which had returned to her with full force when she awoke. In her mind she turned over all the things that had happened on that eventful day.

Like a draught of ice-laden air the thought hit her that Marcus Dillard must have wanted to buy the Bonner mine pretty urgently. She remembered his steely insistence when he'd driven the bargain in her room at the hotel; and his concern about the contract when she arrived here tonight, remembered what Shelby had told her about the attempts of a powerful financial group to buy the mine earlier, and she wondered if the two men with Dillard downstairs might not be members of that group. All roads seemed to point to Dillard, and her fears grew.

Her brain was very clear now. Remembering the housekeeper's last words to her, she went to the bed and pulled back the bedding. Looking about her swiftly she saw what she wanted, pulled down a curtain covering the door to the closet, rolled it into a bundle and thrust it into the bed so that it looked much like a sleeping person in the dim light flickering through the curtains of the immense fourposter. That done, she turned down the wick of the lamp until the bed under the canopy was almost dark. Then she went to the door, softly turned the handle; and let herself on to the dark landing. Her nerves were less steady by the time she'd shut the door, cutting off the light from the bedroom. But she reached the top of the staircase safely, and a glimmer of light from the ground floor seemed to soften the darkness.

She jumped when a door opened downstairs, and the sound of voices came clearly up to her. Then she saw Dillard leading a tall, powerful looking man, who was roughly dressed and wore a long beard, through the hall. She stood with bated breath, clinging to the wide column at the side of the stairs. This, she thought, must be a meeting of importance, reasoning that if Dillard's guests were still with him, a servant would have let this tough looking man in, not Dillard himself. She saw them pass into a room at the foot of the staircase. When the door was shut she crept down the stairs, approached the door, and bent over, listening for what the bearded man had to say to Dillard.

The sound of voices came through that massive door, but she couldn't distinguish a single word that was said. She looked around her for some way of getting out of the house, but she might have been blind for all that she could see in that oppresively black hall. What there was of the glimmer of light which she had noticed upstairs came in from a window beside the iron-bound entrance door.

Silently she crept over the floor, keeping close to the wall until she reached the entrance door. Her hands told her that the door was bolted on the inside, and she knew in any case that she would never get out by way of that door without Dillard's knowing at once what she had done. The window was her only hope.

It was a straight-forward up-and-down sash, closed against the weather. Her fingers worked feverishly on the lock and lifted the sash with extreme caution. She slid her body through the opening and drew the sash down behind her, leaving a narrow finger-hold at the bottom. She felt sure the displaced window wouldn't be discovered before the next morning.

Eagerly, yet with the utmost care,

she moved toward the light which shone out from the room occupied by Dillard and his visitor. A terrace was built out in front of the house, so she had to pass down to the level of the drive and then cross a tree-studded lawn to reach the window. Her feet made no sound on the short grass and she was impatient now of missing the two men's conversation. She hurried forward, and came close to the stone steps which gave access to the terrace. A dark figure moved in front of her. Harriet was right on it before she realized that someone was there. Then the person leaped at her and clapped a hand over her mouth before she could let out a yell.

HER BLOOD froze with panic; and then she saw that it was a woman who held her.

Susie hissed in her ear: "Be quiet! I'm a friend of Pete Shelby's. What are you doing here?"

Harriet whispered, "I'm trying to listen. There's a man in there with Dillard..."

"Jake Fallon," murmured Susie. "I followed him here."

Susie led the way on to the terrace, both women crouching low and making for the wall beneath the window, which was part open. Voices filtered through. Dillard sounded faintly worried. Then Fallon was reassuring him.

"Garnet had to go, Mr. Dillard. He brought in his own crew of tough hands. He was goin' to split the Bonner mine two ways with the gun boss, a feller named Ike Lewis."

"The fool," Dillard said irritably. "Doesn't he know I can hire the best guns in the country? I can hire a hundred gunmen to his one. Yeah, and I've got the law on my side now!"

Fallon grunted. "Lewis tried to ease Shelby outa town today. Shelby just laughed at him, made the whole bunch look like a pack o' Sunday school kids."

"I heard about that," Dillard said dryly. "You reckon now that Shelby'll be taken care of?"

"I told you, I hollered out that Shelby had plugged the Sheriff before I beat it. Half the town took up the cry. I fancy there'll be a warrant swore out for him by the critter that steps into Garnet's boots. But I ain't leavin' it to chance. I'll ride the trails until I get him. It's the only safe way with stubborn critters like Shelby."

"Yeah. Don't play with him, Jake. Just plug him," Dillard said thinly.

Outside, the two women were horrified, but it was Susie who kept control of the situation. They remained motionless under the window while Jack Fallon took his leave of Dillard.

A few minutes later they heard the sound of hoofbeats moving off at a lope along the mountainside. Fallon was riding the trail for Pete Shelby.

6

MORNING light was just appearing when Pete Shelby brushed the straw from his eyes, stretched, and rolled out of the hayloft over the stable. Immediately his senses were alert as to the events of the previous night came sharply to his mind. He descended the ladder to the ground and let himself out through the yard to the street. It was still dark, only the roof-tops were touched with grey, and there was no one about at this early hour.

He had a fight on his hands. He knew now with the certainty of conviction that Marcus Dillard was the key to the murders connected with the Bonner mine, and his thoughts turned to the one-time gambler and to Jake Fallon and to the prospect of being hunted by Monarch's citizens in a posse.

The only man he decided he could trust now was Rusty Brown the bar-

tender at Dillard's saloon. Rusty would only believe Pete guilty if he saw Pete kick a blind man in the face: he was that sort, trusting and generous.

Pete hauled up at the side of the saloon, cut down the alley at the side and located Rusty's room. He knocked on the windowpane with the butt end of his empty Colt until Rusty stirred in his bed and tumbled out, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Aw, what in goldarned heck yuh want at this hour, feller? Uh! Howdy, Pete. Didn't see it was you. What kin I do for you?"

"I'm on the run, Rusty. You heard what happened last night?"

"Sure, sure. Now you tell me what did!"

Briefly Pete told him and Rusty nodded his head wisely.

"Here," he said. "You better come on in and git a cup of hot cawfee."

"That can wait, Rusty. Listen, I've got to call on Trumble and pick up some shells and a couple of boxes of dynamite. I don't know how Trumble is takin' all this, so I want to be ready for a quick getaway when I get the hardware, see?"

"Yeah," Rusty grunted. "What you want me to do?"

"This," Pete said earnestly, "and it's mighty important, old son. I want you to get a message through to the U.S. Marshal in Helena. Tell him to send a deputy down here right away to investigate the murder of the sheriff. I'm countin' on him to arrive quick. These buzzards have killed too many for this mine for them to stop now."

Rusty said gruffly, "You kin count on me, Pete. What you goin' to do next?"

Pete smiled grimly. "Fallon won't rest till he catches me along his gunsights now. What'll he figure after last night? A man in my spot has got to hole up somewhere. I reckon Fallon'll be waitin' for me up there!" He pointed to the mountains where his and the Bonner mine were situated.

Rusty nodded his head. "Watch your step, Pete."

Pete grinned. "There's a few things I can teach even that old grizzly Fallon about them mountains. You wait and see. By the way, have you got a safe place where I can salt away a prisoner till that deputy marshal shows up?"

Rusty looked blank for a moment, then his eyes sparkled and he gave a slow grin. "I reckon I could locate what you want."

"That's good, Rusty. So long, feller, and thanks."

Pete Shelby turned away from the little bartender, hastening his steps now that it was getting rapidly lighter every minute. Trumble's store was only two blocks further along the street, and Pete had picked it because Pop Trumble lived at the back of his store, all on the ground floor. Once again he turned into the alley at the side of the store and rapped on the window.

TRUMBLE was already out of bed, his hair stiff and awry, his eyes staring out of his grey parchment face. His eyes popped out still further when they fixed on Pete Shelby standing outside his window. Pete lifted his gun. "I hate doing this, Pop. I want some slugs and two boxes of dynamite. Here's the cash. I don't have to rob my friends!"

The sarcasm was wasted on the old man, who was muttering like a disturbed sparrow. Pete swung lithely over the windowsill and said softly, "Hurry it up, old man. I've got no time to waste!"

Grumbling and unfriendly in his attitude, Trumble led him to the store, casting an uneasy backward glance at intervals at the levelled gun in Shelby's hand. Pete seized the shells and the explosive gladly, tossed enough money to the old man, and left as abruptly as he had arrived. He waited until he was outside before loading the gun with which he had menaced the storekeeper; it would have been too

unkind to load the empty gun in his face!

The whole town was beginning to stir now, like a gigantic beast awakening; even the false-fronts along the main street seemed to be coming to life. Haste was urgent now. It would be no time at all before Trumble spread the news, and a posse of grim-faced citizens would be out scouring the mountain slopes for him.

His steps led him back to the stable. One of the big gates under the timber arch was open now, he was glad to see. He walked straight in, his gun ready. He tossed a bill at the hostler: "Heave over a bridle, feller. I'll do without the saddle."

Surprised, the hostler picked a bridle from the wall-hook and tossed it to Pete without another thought, nor a second glance at him after he'd examined the paper money.

Pete vaulted astride the horse of his choosing, and the next instant he thundered through the gates in a flurry of dust and chaff chippings. He turned the horse's head at once into the nearest side alley and he dug in his heels with vigor. He went careering over heaps of rubbish, trampled an irate townsman's back-yard plot, and cleared two fences. At back of the main street shops, Pete swung the horse again to point up the mountain trail leading toward his mine workings, and the Bonner mine which was adjacent.

Shelby didn't own a horse of his own in this mining county for the simple reason that it was impossible to make the whole journey to the mine on horseback. There was a point some two hundred yards below his working where the trail petered out, and he'd had to cut rough steps in the face of the rock to climb up to the ledge where he'd built his cabin, a hundred yards or so from the mine.

Once away from the town and climbing the mountain track, he rode more slowly, his eyes searching the rocky heights above the trail. He knew that if Fallon lay in waiting for him, with rifle barrel lined round one of the boulders or spurs of rock up there, he had little chance of escaping the first bullet. But all the way he was keyed up to battle pitch, every nerve, every sense alert for a tell-tale movement, or the puff of powder smoke that would signal Fallon's presence to him.

Pete dismounted and tied the horse to a spur of rock a way down from the line of steps he'd cut in the rock-face. Here it was easier to clamber up from the trail over ground which, although steeply rising, was rough enough to carry a litter of small boulders and, here and there, the thin, straight pencil of a pine tree. Keeping low, Pete climbed swiftly, rising up cautiously at intervals to scan the ground ahead. This way carried him gradually towards the steps, but on higher ground, and this was the spot where an intending dry-gulcher would be holed up waiting.

As he neared the steps, and the boulders became smaller and fewer, giving him less cover, he went down lower, almost on hands and knees, and he slowed his pace to a crawl. He dragged through the littered rocks in a vain search for Fallon, moving up and down in a zigzag line towards his cabin. Close to the stretch of bare rock which was his last crossing, Pete lay down flat, his eyes raking the higher slopes and staring hard at the neat, weathered log cabin he'd built, looking for some sign of an attacker and seeing none.

But he knew Jake Fallon was as cunning as an old grizzly. There was a stretch of thirty yards of open flat rock, with not a scrap of cover anywhere separating Pete from the door of his cabin. No one could approach it without leaving himself a wide open target that not even a tenderfoot with a gun could possibly miss. It wasn't worth the risk, Pete decided. Fallon was foxy enough to have already seen him, if the outlaw were holed up inside the cabin; and now to

be playing with him, letting him think the coast was clear, tricking him into making that last stretch of open ground, where there wouldn't be any mistake about killing with the first bullet.

PETE LAY flat behind a shallow boulder, his eyes screwed up, trying to pick out something that would testify to Fallon's presence. Cautiously, he swung the sack from his shoulder where he'd been carrying his slugs and explosive, and slid it along the ground to rest behind another rock. He was cursing his own haste now for not having bought a rifle. Fallon was sure to have one, and if a long-distance battle developed here on the crags of the mountain, Pete with only a Colt .45 would be defenseless.

He rolled on to his left shoulder, swinging up the Colt and lining it on the door of his cabin. He fired one shot, the bullet thudding into the heavy, upright split logs of the door and bedding there. The echo of the shot floated along the mountainside until it died to a whisper and left only a stilly silence again. There was no movement from the cabin.

While Pete waited, he thrust a fresh shell from his pocket into the gun, fillings its chambers. Soon, one bullet could mean the difference between life and death. Time limped by, and yet nothing seemed to happen.

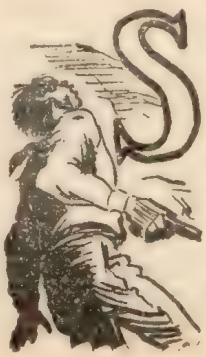
Drawing up his knees, Pete began to crawl forward, his skin beginning to tingle as he came more and more out from his covering rock. Some sixth sense, the sense of the hunted animal, made him look up at the boulder-strewn slope flanking and rising above his cabin. The sun glinted sharply on something metallic. Even as his brain was registering that this was the barrel of a rifle, Pete flung himself sideways rolling over and pressing himself half up on to his toes and then springing back behind a covering rock.

The whine of the bullet hit his ears and then came the vicious smack of lead on the rock at his feet, exactly where he'd been when he'd spotted the rifle barrel. Slivers of stone and spurts of dust flew up as the bullet chipped at the rock and then was deflected away down the slope.

Pete was still in the line of fire, so he had no time to waste. Flat on his belly, he crawled, swift as a startled snake, into cover. Peering cautiously round the rock, his eyes probed the slope, picking the point where he'd seen the gun. There was no sign of Fallon now; the echoes had fallen away. And Pete knew with a feeling of sick emptiness in his stomach that the range was too great for his Colt. All of two hundred yards too great.

"All Fallon has to do is wait," Pete thought savagely. From the outlaw's position, he could pick off anything that moved up or down—until nightfall. Pete couldn't afford to wait that long. At any time a posse might come winding up the trail, and he would be caught between two fires. And by nightfall he wanted to be at Marcus Dillard's house. Then a plan began to shape itself in his mind, and he thought: *If I get out of this spot alive, Dillard can write out a one-way ticket to hell..."*

Over his head a bullet whined; a second one snapped viciously at the low boulder in front of him. He guessed that it would be just two inches over his head.



SUSIE DELLOWS and Harriet Bonner, crouching below Dillard's window, were about to creep back toward the house's big entrance door and let themselves in through the window—Jake Fallon had been gone some

half an hour or so now—when Susie caught Harriet's arm and stopped her.

Another voice came metallically through the partly open window.

"You'd be Marcus Dillard, I guess."

"What's that mean to you?" Dillard snarled. He sounded rattled.

"Elevate or you'll never know, hombre; Bill, whip out the critter's sneak guns."

Outside, Susie whispered, "Ike Lewis!" and they heard the sound of heavy feet crossing the floor, a brief silence, and then two separate, distinct thuds.

"Always the tinhorn, Dillard, ain't you?"

"What do you want, Lewis?"

There was a pause, then Ike said, "I'll be reasonable. Say a hundred grand."

"You're crazy."

"The Bonner mine's worth more than that to you."

"Curse you, what if it is? The mine belongs to me."

"You gave Mrs. Bonner eight grand for it." There was disgust in the gunman's voice. Hired killer, rustler and bank-buster, Lewis knew where he stood. Even his mean conscience was outraged at Dillard's swindling of a widow—the widow of the man who's been murdered by Dillard's own agents. Ike went on, "You're getting off cheap. My figure's a hundred thousand. You'll still make more outa the Bonner mine now you got London men to put money into your company at Helena. I found out a few things about you, Dillard, after Garnet hired me. We figured you might be goin' to make too much outa the deal. We was right!"

Dillard said in a choking sort of voice, beaten, "I haven't got that much money."

"Mebbyso you ain't." Ike sounded not in the least perturbed. "Till you get it, I'll just take that contract off you that Mrs. Bonner signed."

"I haven't got it," Dillard breathed. "I left it at the bank."

Ike's voice sounded weary. "Dillard, quit wastin' time! You was watched leavin' the hotel, and the same guy's been on your trail ever since. You ain't had the chance to leave it anywhere. This is your room, here, ain't it?"

Dillard said nothing.

Ike Lewis said casually, "Take it off him, Ede."

Dillard spat out a string of obscenity.

"Here it is, Ike," came Nelson's heavy voice. He laughed. "It sure is hurting this hombre, like he was havin' all his teeth out!"

"Worse!" grinned Ike. "It's costin' him a lot more!"

The two women kept very still outside, waiting now for Lewis and Nelson to leave.

At length, Susie raised her head until she could just see over the top of the sill. Dillard was lying face down on a long leather seat, his wrists and ankles tied together behind him, and a long length of rope wound round his body securing him to the seat. He couldn't budge an inch.

QUIETLY, the two women stood up now, and returned to the house by way of the window that Harriet had left slightly open. Inside, Harriet led the way along the dark hall, and they felt their way up the staircase. A faint chink of light showed beneath the door of Harriet's bedroom.

Treading softly, they approached it. Harriet turned the handle and gently opened the door.

The first thing she noticed was that the light was burning more brightly than she had left it. She didn't have time to communicate her fears to Susie, following right behind her.

As the door swung open wider, she saw the grim, gaunt figure of the housekeeper standing in the middle

of the floor, and there was a tiny derringer in her hand, pointing straight at Harriet's chest.

"Perhaps I should have warned you," the woman said acidly. "Mr. Dillard thinks it too dangerous for his guests to go roaming about the house. The house is so very big and you could easily come to some harm, wandering in the dark. Your simple ruse did not deceive me." She pointed contemptuously to the lumped up piece of curtain now revealed on the bed, the blankets having been thrown back.

"I will call Mr. Dillard," she said. "You must stay locked in the room until he arrives."

She kept the gun steady in her hand until she was out in the passage, and she was as stiff and prim as an English matron of that period. Susie and Harriet moved slowly into the room, and the housekeeper drew the door shut. A key was inserted in the lock, turned with well-oiled smoothness, and then the key was withdrawn.

Harriet fell down into a chair, her face white and strained-looking. "What will he do with us?" she asked fearfully, tears close to her eyes. "Especially, when he knows we've been out tonight! He won't leave us alive... We'll know too much..." She was fretful, and Susie was afraid she was close to hysteria.

Susie Dellows laid a calm hand on Harriet's shoulder.

"If we do something to try and get away we'll feel better about it," she said soothingly. "And Pete Shelby won't be far away. He'll get us out of this!"

"If he's in time," Harriet wailed. "And still alive!"

Susie was thinking that, too, but she said nothing. Instead, she began searching the room, thinking of possible exits. There was no chimney and all windows were in a sheer wall that dropped straight to the ground, to a paved yard below. There was one connecting door. It was locked, as was the main door from the passage, and neither of them moved the slightest.

"There's only one way, Harriet," Susie said quietly. "Do you think you can get down a rope?"

"A rope?"

"From the window. We can knot the curtains. They're strong enough. But we haven't got much time..."

8

PETE SHELBY had to reduce the distance between Fallon, and his present position. To do that meant crossing at least two stretches of fairly open ground with little or no cover at all—an open invitation to the sniper on the high ground, unless Pete went back towards the trail where he'd tied his horse and then climbed straight up to near the ridge of the formation, and doubled back to come on Fallon from above.

He crawled to where he had dumped the sack of ammunition and dynamite. He pulled out a box of the explosive, and drew out three sticks of it. He made frequent pauses to scan the rise where Fallon lay, wondering if the outlaw had circled further round or down towards the cabin.

Taking the risk of giving Fallon the chance of a snap shot at him, Pete got to his feet, crouching as low as his balance would permit, holding the dynamite in his left hand, his cocked six-gun in the right. He made off back along the way he'd come up from his horse, dodging from one patch of cover to the next, then striking off toward the high ground.

He heard the sudden sharp spang of the rifle and he dropped like a stone, swinging his head round to see where Fallon was shooting. He

watched for the second shot, and saw the flying fragments of rock come up from the boulder he'd been using for cover before he set out. So far Fallon hadn't spotted him. But the outlaw wouldn't stay where he was for long if no answering fire came from Pete. Fallon would soon realize that Pete must be either unarmed or with only a handgun.

Pete climbed swiftly, striking now a stand of pines which for the moment hid his view of Fallon's position. At the topmost edge of the timber he stood trying to estimate the distance now. It was closer to Colt range, but still right on the outside limit where accurate shooting was too much a matter of chance. A hundred feet higher up was the rimrock.

Pete went on climbing, increasing his range now, but gaining height on Fallon. He reached the top shortly and sat a moment for a blow and to survey the slope below, hoping to pick out Fallon's exact spot.

Suddenly he caught a movement and his eyes focused on it. He picked out a tall, black Stetson on the ground and, a yard away, the long, powerful body of Jake Fallon with a rifle held under him in one hand crawling to Pete's right, that is, round the slope towards the cabin. Fallon was holding his range, obviously realizing that Pete had only a handgun and couldn't shoot the distance; he was keeping his height, too, and Pete could see the dark, shaggy head moving as the outlaw's trained, sharp eyes scoured the rough ground below.

Pete grinned, lifted his Colt, sighted it like a rifle, trying to make allowances for the distance and the fall of the ground, and aimed for the seat of Fallon's pants. He squeezed the trigger. His aim was good, but the slug fell short by a yard or so. All the same, it had the desired effect.

Fallon leapt like a startled rabbit and bowled for cover. Pete saw his head come round the side of a rock. "Better toss your rifle away, Fallon!" Pete yelled. "I've got dynamite up here!"

To back his statement, Pete dropped his gun, passed a stick of dynamite to his right hand, swung it back and lobbed it down. Fallon's rifle barrel was just coming into sight when Pete ducked behind the rimrock. He went down on to his belly, his elbows holding his body off the ground.

He was hardly in position when the blast crashed out and went racketing through the mountains, thrown from one rock slope to another like a snowball until it melted away and the only sound left was the memory of it, still pounding in Pete's eardrums.

Pete crawled to the rim and peered briefly over. There was no movement from below and he had a sudden fear that he'd thrown the dynamite too close to Fallon and killed him. That would be the end of his plan, he thought grimly.

"Fallon!" he bawled. "Toss away your rifle where you can't reach it! That's a taste of what you got comin' if you don't."

There was no reply, and Pete felt sick with disgust, thinking that his plan was collapsing like a house of cards. He left one stick of the dynamite on the ridge, held the other ready to throw, and gripped his six-gun in the left hand for use at close quarters.

"If I see a wrong move from you, hombre, I've got another stick ready to blow you to hell and a long way beyond. Toss away your gun!"

Pete stood upright, as if inviting the outlaw to take a shot at him. There was no movement from below. Pete was almost convinced by now that Fallon had been hurled back by the blast and was probably dead with a smashed neck or spine. He was cursing himself for his bad luck and his even worse throwing, but he kept alert at the same time. Feigning death was one of the oldest tricks, but it was still a very effective one if you didn't take every care.

He kept on walking, poising on the

balls of his feet, catlike, ready to leap aside if Fallon poked his rifle into sight again, the muscles taut in his right arm so that he could throw down another stick of dynamite if Fallon needed any more convincing—this time he would make certain that his throw went wide enough.

HE'D COVERED a hundred yards of ground, and he was a hundred or so feet down from the rimrock when he saw Fallon's blue and red checkered shirt. The outlaw was lying on his back, his arms flung out to each side of him, palms upward. Pete's heart sank. His chance of using Jake Fallon against Dillard seemed to have gone. He thought gloomily that the deputy marshal from Helena was as likely to wheel him in for the murder of Ed Garnet as anyone, now that the real killer was dead.

Still Pete didn't relax his caution until he was within a few feet of the outlaw's body, and he reversed the weapons in his hands, knowing that now he could rely on the Colt. He stood for a moment looking down at the big, bearded outlaw, and his eyes suddenly sharpened. There seemed to be a faint movement in the man's chest; he looked more closely and saw that Fallon was breathing regularly, though slowly, and he went down to feel the outlaw's pulse.

In that split second of realization that Fallon still lived, that he seemed to be only stunned and probably otherwise unhurt, Pete's caution weakened as he started to bend over Fallon. He was still suspicious, but was so pleased that the outlaw wasn't dead, that he accepted the possibility that Fallon was still unconscious.

As Pete bent over, Fallon sprang into action. One leg came up with the speed and suddenness of a striking rattler; Pete jerked away instinctively; and the outlaw's boot came swinging up at him, aimed at his groin, but catching only Pete's thigh a little above the knee. It rocked Pete back on his heels, and he teetered for a moment. Pete's face was white, and his left hand and wrist tensed automatically as he tried to cushion the dynamite against the shock of his fall. But he managed to hold on to his balance, and he'd recovered before Fallon was on his feet.

"This is dynamite! Are you loco?" Pete almost screamed at him, holding out the stick of explosive for Fallon to see.

The outlaw hesitated as he saw it, and Pete noticed the pallor underlying the weatherbeaten tan of the man's face. Fallon looked as if he'd just had a hell of a shock. Pete guessed that the blast had thrown him to his back, knocking him out for a few minutes, and that he'd then shammed unconsciousness till Pete had arrived. All the same, Fallon had had a mighty shock.

Fallon's lips moved, twisting back off his teeth as though he were in pain. His voice was a dry, harsh rasp as he spoke: "What yuh gonna do, Shelby?"

"I'm takin' you in, tough hand," Pete said, rather shakily.

"Yuh can't pin nothin' on me!" Fallon said hoarsely. "They'll get you for killin' Ed Garnet."

"Not on your life! You're goin' to admit you killed him!"

"Yuh're makin' it easy for me to blow yuh to hell an' back..."

Pete flourished the Colt. "You've lost your chance now, feller," he said gently. "Still, while there's life there's hope, Fallon. Mebbyso, we'll find a way of savin' your neck. Can you figure out any way?"

Fallon scowled at him, but found nothing to say.

"I might suggest a way to you after we get back to Monarch," Pete said softly. "With the hangrope starin' you in the face, the chance of clearin' out of the country, a free man, can be mighty attractive, Fallon."

"Just what are yuh drivin' at?" the outlaw growled.

"Start walkin', hombre, and walk

straight for my cabin! I'll be askin' you the questions later. You give the right answers, feller, and you're a free man. That I promise!"

Fallon stared at him for a few seconds, his eyes glowering and rimmed with red, and then he grunted. "You got the winnin' hand," and added slowly, "I reckon I can tell you what you want to know if you're shootin' square about this ticket outa the country..."

"I'm shootin' square," Pete said flatly. "You give the right answers like I said, and you get a one-way ticket out. Don't forget it's one-way, either. The rest is up to you. I ain't foolin' hombre. But you got no option other than take it or leave it!"

Fallon gave him a last, flat hard stare, and then nodded. "I reckon I got no option at all. I'll take it!"

"Now march," Pete said.

THE OUTLAW turned his back and began to walk with long, easy strides over the stony ground, weaving in and out between the littered rocks and bigger boulders, moving towards the trim little cabin sitting down on the rock platform below. Behind him, Pete followed watchfully, keeping always two or three paces behind.

He was elated now. The plan could work out. Fallon was a realist about the situation. He saw clearly that he had no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, Pete was pleased. He had been prepared to rough Fallon up to convince him that it was better to cooperate, but that was something Pete hated to do, even when it was unavoidable.

The slope flattened out and cleared and they reached the cabin. Pete looked ruefully at the bullet hole in his door, then turned the key in the padlock, opened the door, and shepherded the outlaw inside. Telling Fallon to sit in a chair where he could see him, Pete bent over a chest and pulled out a coil of new rope. Fallon, doing as he was told, stretched out on the bunk, and Pete trussed his ankles and wrists, leaving enough slack rope between his feet, to let him get down the steps to the trail below.

"You're a squareshooter all right, Shelby," Fallon said, and Pete noticed a difference in his voice. "I'd be proud to have you for a pardner."

Pete grinned. "I don't reckon you're likely to, unless they still figure it was me that plugged Garnet."

"Yallerbellied snake!" Fallon growled. "He only got what he deserved. Dillard paid him to keep clear of main street the day Bonner got shot..." Pete's brow clouded, and his mouth stiffened. Fallon continued: "The rat shot my pardner, tryin' to make his number good with the town. He was after the Bonner mine himself."

"Better quit that talk, Jake," Pete murmured, with an edge to his voice. "You don't expect me to feel sorry for Sid Doyle, I reckon."

"Reckon not," Fallon muttered.

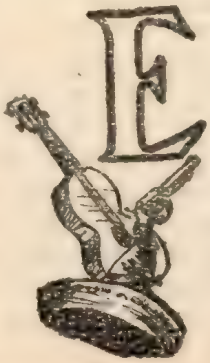
"Forget it," Pete said abruptly. "It ain't you I'm concerned about. I want the man who paid you to do it!"

"Yeah," Fallon said, and left it at that.

Pete waited till the light started to fade before they set out for Monarch. Then, when the sun was cutting the rim of the mountains behind the cabin, they started out.

It was quite dark when they reached the outskirts of the town of Monarch.

9



EARLIER that day, Rusty Brown had a caller at his quarters at rear of the *Lucky Strike* saloon. It was Susie, now clean and dressed in a long, frilly frock amply packed out with underclothing—it was

a welcome change after the cold of the previous night when she'd had on only her dancing clothes. She knew Rusty as a friend, and she was enquiring after Pete Shelby.

"He was here early on," Rusty told her, explaining Pete's reason for his visit to the mine. "This danged town's a-thirstin' for his blood over this Garnet killin'," Rusty growled. "You'd think, mebbe, Garnet owed 'em all some money. Mebbyso, he did!"

Susie told him of her trailing of Jake Fallon the night before, and what she'd overheard Fallon saying to Dillard. She didn't tell him, though of the trap she and Harriet Bonner had been caught in, how they'd had to slide down an improvised life-line made of knotted curtains, how Dillard's roughnecks had appeared just as they were ready to make their break on the ground and instead, to avoid them, they'd had to circle back up the mountainside and plod wearily along the slope, high above slumbering Monarch, with no recognized trail or track to follow. And how they'd at last reached town, thoroughly exhausted two hours after sun-up.

"Seen Lewis or any of his bunch in the saloon today, Rusty?" she asked.

"Only the hamfisted, tough boy. Nelson, I fancy his name is."

"Yeah, that's him. Watch out for Ike, Rusty. His name spells trouble from now on!"

"Yeah?"

"Tell you later. I'll be back here at sundown. You reckon Pete will?"

"There's nothin' surer," Rusty said, and he dropped his broad-palmed, work-lined hand over the back of hers. "Don't worry."

She gave him a grateful smile, and then returned to her room at the casino. Thoughtfully, she opened a drawer in her dressing and make-up table, and pulled out a small gun, loaded it and stuffed it inside her bodice near to the neckline, so that she could reach it easily and in a hurry.

Then she left the casino by a back door and went towards the north end of the town, returning to main street by way of an alley, which brought her out opposite the hotel entrance. Casually, she strolled in, nodded to the clerk and went up to Harriet's room, knocked on the door, turned the handle with her left hand, and with her right gripped the butt of her concealed derringer.

As she opened the door, a man who'd been standing just inside spun round quickly and Susie recognized Lewis. The sudden look of anger that appeared on his face changed just as suddenly to one of charm. Ike Lewis bowed. Susie managed to stop grinning by the time he'd straightened up, and she backed away into the right-hand corner of the room that was nearest the door.

Harriet Bonner frowned. "We were talking business, Susie," she said, a little frostily.

"That's what I came for, too," Susie said calmly.

"I put it to her this way, Susie," Ike said quickly, casting a sharp, sidelong glance at her. "Mrs. Bonner got eight thousand from Dillard. I'm offerin' her another eight thousand for her half of the contract. Ain't that fair? Mrs. Bonner is asking fifty thousand!"

Susie didn't know what to say. She looked out of the corner of her eye at Harriet and smiled. "Fifty thousand sure is a lot of money. But the Bonner mine is worth double that. It's the richest producer this side of Butte!"

Lewis scowled. "It ain't worth that to me," he said flatly.

Susie pulled out her gun. "In that case we're not sellin'," she said coolly.

Lewis choked on the bitter taste in his mouth. "Listen, Mrs. Bonner," he appealed. "It seems like you savvy what's goin' on. I don't hold with Dillard dealin' you the crooked deck the way he did. I'll get a hundred grand outa the chiseller if you'll come in with me. If you work in with him,

he can draw up a new contract. If you do work with that double-crossin' snake, are you goin' to take eight grand when it's worth more'n a hundred to him? If you are, you sure are loco!"

Harriet said, a little too eagerly, "And if we work with you?"

Ike watched her through narrowed lids. "You got your eight. On my side, I got seven men for the share-out. What do you say you take forty, I take sixty?"

Harriet's eyes sparkled. "I'd take that," she said.

"We'll wait and see," Susie said quietly. "I reckon that's all we can say, Ike. Except that you can bet your last buck we won't be helpin' Dillard any. That's all."

Ike didn't try to bow this time. There was a foxy, puzzled look on his face. He said, "Sure," and backed through the door. "You'll find me in the *Lucky Strike* if you want to talk about this some more."

SUSIE DELLOWS was waiting in Rusty Brown's own room at the back of the *Lucky Strike* when the sun set. Through the window she could see the sky over the next building's roof; she saw it mottle with pink and deep inky blue, saw it gradually darken, as if a mantle of mist were being drawn over the earth, shutting out the light. She jumped up when she heard footsteps coming near to Rusty's entrance door, heard them stop outside. With trembling fingers she drew out her derringer while the door handle turned, and the door opened a couple of inches from the jamb.

Pete Shelby's voice called out, "You there, Rusty?"

Susie called back, "Pete!" though she had sense enough to hold her voice down to little more than a whisper. She let the gun sag in her hand, then returned it to her bodice as Pete swung the door wide open, and she, too, stared at his levelled Colt.

He glanced round the room and laughed shortly. "Can't afford to take risks at this stage," he said. He stared into her eyes for a moment, and then looked away. "This is home, Jake," Pete said, turning to the outlaw who was standing at the side of the door, his ankles still held by a slack rope, his wrists bound behind his back.

They both came inside and sat down, Pete facing the outlaw, his Colt laid across his knees ready for trouble. Soon, Rusty Brown came in from the bar, smiling his satisfaction. "You got the bird, Pete! And I've got just the place for him!"

"Don't be too hard on him, Rusty," Pete said. "Jake's my ace-in-the-hole!"

Rusty took the Colt and Jake Fallon got up. Rusty prodded him through a door inside the saloon building, and the two men disappeared. Pete rose and followed them, watchful as a cat in the night. But Jake was giving no trouble now. He knew he was cornered, and he was prepared to believe that Pete Shelby would give him a square deal. He was rather looking forward to a change of scenery!

Upstairs, Pete got an account from Susie of what had happened at Dillard's house the night before. Pete listened intently, his mind alert for the means of striking the last blow at Dillard. "Rusty," Pete said, "you say the Marshal from Helena is due to arrive on tomorrow's stage. I reckon I know somethin' else that will be freighted on that stage! One hundred thousand bucks from Dillard's Helena banking account!"

"You reckon Dillard's gone through to Helena today?" Susie asked. "No one's seen him since yesterday. I've been askin' questions."

"He can't afford to lose the Bonner mine now," Pete said decisively. "His English friends would drop him like a hot coal if he slipped up on the Bonner mine. It's obvious that that's the mine which they regard as the one

most likely to guarantee their investments."

"Harriet's got ideas about getting a cut out of that hundred thousand bucks," Susie said dryly, and told Pete of the loose bargain that was struck with Ike Lewis.

"Give us a drink, Rusty," Pete grinned. "Marcus Dillard's got a tough day ahead of him tomorrow!"

TIM "FOX" MATTHEWS, U. S. Deputy Marshal stationed at Helena, at that time the capital of Montana, rode into Monarch on the next day's stage. Rusty Brown was waiting as inconspicuously as he could for the arrival of the stage. From a nearby awning post on the boardwalk, he scanned the new arrivals with careful, searching eyes, until he noticed the marshal's badge. Then he stepped forward quickly and, with only a word of greeting, guided the Marshal along the street to the alley at the side of the *Lucky Strike*.

Pete and Susie were inside, and between them they quickly filled in the details of Dillard's actions and schemes to gain control of the Bonner mine. Jake Fallon was brought up from the cellar and gave his evidence.

Matthews nodded his grey head. "Sounds pretty clear to me! I'd take the chance of bringin' this Marcus Dillard up before the next court session at Helena. And I'd take responsibility for keepin' him in a cell until the court sits!"

Matthews and Pete went through an inside door into the barroom of the *Lucky Strike*. Sure enough, Ike Lewis, with four or five of his bunch clustered round him, was sitting at a big round table in a corner of the room.

Pete kept his face turned away from the other drinkers as much as possible, and Matthews was no longer wearing his badge. They sat down near the wall on the same side as Lewis' table, and Pete lounged back in his chair, tilting his hat forward over his eyes. Tim Matthews bought drinks, came back with them, and they sat toying with the glasses, waiting for something to happen.

No one had yet seen Dillard in Monarch today, either. It was possible that they might have to wait another day or so. Pete Shelby was prepared to wait a month or a year to square his debt with Dillard. Now he was going to square the debt, to repay something of what Dillard had done to Bill Bonner, and his wife Harriet, and to repay on his own terms.

They hadn't long to wait, however. The bar still had only a sparse handful of customers in it—it was still before noon—when Pete's nerves tightened, and his eyes glinted hard at the swinging entrance doors. Standing in the doorway was the tall, flabbily fat figure of Marcus Dillard. His round head looked repulsive as he stood there, and his eyes were narrowed to hard, needle-sharp points.

He came in slowly, hands in pockets, and he let his glance fall casually on Ike Lewis' group in the corner. He walked towards them and stopped in front of the table. "How do," he said, but he couldn't disguise the hatred in his voice.

Lewis grinned at him. "You got it all?"

Dillard nodded.

"Didn't take as long as you expected, hey?" Ike was amused. "That's chip money for you, Dillard. I told you I was being generous! It's worth a whole lot more to you!"

"Maybe you're right."

"When'll you be ready, Dillard?" Ike's voice had an edge to it now.

"Today!" Dillard almost snarled.

"Be at the first fork in the trail north of Monarch. A cottonwood is right on the spot, about five yards west of the trail at the fork. Be there one hour before sunset and come alone. Bring any tough hands with you and I'll see you comin'. You won't get what you want. Savvy?"

"Sure. I'll be there. Alone!" Dillard snapped.

Lewis grinned insolently at him, and his crew looked pleased with themselves.

Marcus Dillard turned to go out. He was sweating with nervous rage and it cost him a mighty effort to control his temper.

Fox Matthews murmured, "Your story sticks, young feller," and he stood up. As he stood up a pair of long-barreled six-guns appeared in his hands. They seemed to come from nowhere.

Matthews followed Dillard across the floor. "Stay where you are, Dillard," the marshal said, his voice as cold and hard as steel.

Pete Shelby knocked the Stetson to the back of his head, stood up and walked into the middle of the room to join Matthews. Pete had a gun in each hand now, and he covered the startled Lewis gang.

"Marcus Dillard," went on Fox Matthews, "you're wanted on the charge of murder...."

DILLARD had pivoted on his feet at the sound of his name the first time. There was surprise and irritation in his face as he stared at Matthews, until the marshal named his charge; Dillard saw Shelby then, and his mouth flopped open a trace, and his expression changed to one of sheer terror.

"Damn you!" he blustered. "I have to see my lawyer in Helena first!"

"You'll soon get the chance, my friend," the marshal said dryly. "That's where you'll be headed soon's I can take you!" He added, "In case you don't know my face, I'm Deputy Marshal Matthews from State seat at Helena."

Pete's attention was divided now between Lewis and his crew and Dillard. Pete felt that he was the most interested person in this drama—excepting Dillard, of course—and he was watching Dillard's face out of the corner of one eye. He noticed a change come over the man's expression.

Dillard's hands were still in the pockets of his Prince Albert jacket. With only the faintest of movement, he tilted up the hidden gun and shot clear at Matthews' belly.

As soon as he'd fired the shot, Dillard turned and ran for his life. It was astonishing how quickly he could run, with his fat body, when his life depended on his speed.

He bowled through the doors and over the edge of the boardwalk, running across the main street, swerving slightly as he ran. Pete left Ike's bunch to their own devices and tailed after Dillard, who reached the opposite boardwalk as Pete jumped clear out of the *Lucky Strike* on to the road. He couldn't shoot just then, for Dillard had mixed with a bunch of men on the sidewalk. They made no attempt to stop him at first. Then Pete yelled, "Stop him! He's a killer!"

Dillard swung off the plankwalk as a couple of men coming towards him tried to step in his way. Dillard jumped out on to the street, and Pete had his first chance of getting a shot at him. Dillard stumbled, twisted his body to bring his right arm round; Pete saw the black blob of the gun in his hand; then a spurt of flame came back from Dillard, and the slug hit the dust of the road a few inches in front of Pete.

Pete brought his gun up calmly, without panic now. Ahead of him, Dillard was running a straight course. Pete brought up the barrel, thumbed the hammer, and put six bullets into Dillard's back. He felt no regret at the way in which the man died. His body slackened and kept on moving by the force of its own movement. Marcus Dillard died flat on his face in the middle of Monarch's main street.

Tim Matthews died from his gutshot, less than half an hour later. There was nothing more to do but send the report to Helena.

Jake Fallon came up from his cell down below, and Pete told him, "Better saddle up a horse and ride, Jake. Far away as you can, and don't ever come back. You're free now. That was the bargain. You did your part. Now there ain't no trial! Dillard's already dead."

HARRIET BONNER was ready to climb aboard the stage on the first leg of her journey home to Kansas. The Concord was empty now, and the fresh team of horses was just being led out of the stable. Harriet's baggage had been piled on to the rack at the rear of the driver's seat.

Pete Shelby and Susie stood near the edge of the roadway, talking and making last farewells to Harriet. They'd not seen much of her during the past few days, and now she was indignantly showing them a letter she'd just received from the Helena Mining Investment Company. The letter was signed, 'Vernon Blackwood.'

Briefly, it told her that the company was prepared to pay her an additional ten thousand dollars as some kind of compensation for the inconvenience caused to her. Harriet remembered the English voice, and she said to Pete bitterly, "I don't know whether that's for Bill's sake, or whether they're trying to cover up the loss of their half of the contract. You haven't seen anything of Ike Lewis, I guess."

Pete grinned. "I'd say they pulled their freight about a minute before I plugged Dillard. I don't reckon we'll see them here again."

A short time later, the stage rolled out of Monarch. Harriet Bonner had gone. The Bonner mine stayed on as a legend, but soon that name disappeared, because the company didn't like to be reminded of the way it had come to own the mine.

Susie turned her eyes up towards Pete's face. She was bright and happy today, and yet there was a note of gloom about Pete.

He put his arm round her shoulders. "Things are changing, here, in the West—all over the United States. We're getting out of date, getting old. Our days are over, Susie...."

"And yet they're only just beginning," she said.

He smiled down at her. "We'll sell out and move on, eh? Maybe a ranch down Wyoming way.... Where'll we start?"

"Right here if you like." And they walked on along the street, seeing no one, seeing nothing but the future that lay ahead of them.

★

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Metisk and his mate were carrying the cubs to safety.

Red Enemy

The terrible red enemy to all creatures in the forest is — fire!

By Harold F. Cruickshank

METISK, the big silver-gray dog-wolf, cocked his head sharply. His nose quivered and then he bristled his hackles, sharply, as his keen sense of smell brought to his nostrils that most dreaded of all scents—the tang of smoke!

Metisk now bobbed his head to glimpse the muzzle of his mate, Achak, at one of the den exits. He gasped softly, and she came to his side, to wheel and flank him and rear her head.

Her den-rubbed brush stretched out almost straight behind her, the she-wolf began to weave from side to side, and she trembled in every limb.

Now both wolves snuffled the smoke tang from their nostrils. Achak turned in, and struck her mate sharply with the side of her closed jaws. He peeled back his lips, exposing his huge fangs, but made no move to counter. Achak had great wisdom, a wisdom developed from sharpened instincts down through the years in this wild range of Buck River Valley. Besides, her every sense was the keener now, sharpened by her responsibility toward seven youngling whelps now snoring contentedly many feet down in the sand cave den.

Despite Metisk's size and lordling

status, there were seasons when Achak took over the prerogative of leadership: during the raising of the young, and later when first the maturing young ones went out to hunt as a pack.

Metisk had been mated with this long, lean gray timber wolf for all his mature life. No further signal was required by him; he leaped out, stretching toward the northwest across the tinder-dry brush-studded range.

Unusually early spring weather and light snows, had delayed the greening of the grass; no rain had come following the definite big thaw.

As Metisk ran, he pricked his ears sharply back and forth, catching the sibilant hiss of the prevailing wind through dry grass and scrub, as he scouted the source of the smoke. Back at the den, Achak stood, head high, never more alert—ready at a signal from her mate to commence the evacuation of her young ones.

A westering sun glared fiercely in his battle against the roiling black smoke masses, but at last it was blotted out; as Metisk topped a hogback ridge, his sides blowing hard, a tongue of flame leaped fiendishly into an old, dry tamarac swamp, where resinous skeleton boles caught and whipped flame in mad spirals skywards.

The big wolf flicked dry lips with his long tongue. Now he closed his mouth as he watched a muledeer doe, heavy with fawn, go by through a screening of willow scrub. She was blowing sharply, her eyes were wide with terror. In other circumstances, she would have been an easy target for Metisk, but he made no move to attack. He had only one concern—the safety of his mate and their young.

AS HE SAW glowing embers whipped from the blazing dry tamaracs, to be whorled on to ignite new fires well out on the ridge, he cringed. The fire at the new zone, fanned by the sharp wind, quickly assumed alarming proportions.

Metisk coughed as the heavier fumes from low, dank swamp vegetation filled his nose and throat. He turned to glare into the main red tide, then swung to con the sector surrounding Muskeg Lake, always a haven in a fire emergency—but that entire zone seemed to be wholly surrounded.

He lifted and set down his paws by turns, swayed from side to side in mounting agitation, then sharply lifted his hackles. The time had come for swift, decisive action. There were seven whelplings to take care of, at an age when they could not be expected to move any distance under their own power.

Metisk wheeled and stretched into his distance-eating lope back to the den, down whose near exit he thrust his nose. He came back again to glare at his mate, and quickly Achak understood.

A sluggish porcupine bristled his quills directly in Metisk's path as the big wolf, a limp whelp struggling in his jaws, made for the river.

Metisk swung wide around a fringe of brush and windfalls, stumbling now and then as the whelp obscured the fallen or leaning impedimenta. Out in the clear again, the big wolf froze, as brush crackled near by, and a gangly-legged moose yearling went stampeding by.

Now Metisk turned to search for his mate. Smoke was crowding them now, whorling in an ever deepening fog over the whole range, but at last Achak emerged and Metisk watched her swing wide of the porcupine.

Off in the distance a lone dog-coyote wailed dismally, and the echoes of his cries were caught and re-echoed by Moakwa, the loon, back at the fire-encircled lake.

All creatures of the wilds were alerted, but not all would escape. Some of the lesserlings—the field-mice and their newborn young, and squirrels with young in tree-nests—would be trapped. Nor would it be easy for the greater ones: a bear with twin cubs

might experience great difficulty getting both cubs to safety.

As if aware of all this, Metisk now spun and broke into an easy lope, and in his tracks came Achak—though at lesser speed for the rearing of her vigorous young had exacted its toll of her stamina...

●

Metisk was waiting for his mate at the riverbank. He nudged her into the stream first, lowered his head as he watched her struggle for a few moments before she found her paddle-stroke timing with which to battle the current. Not until she was clear of the danger of an undertow, and in slacker water, did Metisk seize his youngling and breast the stream.

They cached their young in a shallow, sandy draw which was dry enough to provide a comfortable haven, yet moist enough to offer safety should the red tide leap the stream.

Now the two adult wolves swam back almost flank to flank, the more powerful Metisk swimming to the upstream side of his mate.

At the left bank, Achak shook herself vigorously, but Metisk scarcely flung off surplus water from his coat. Then together they loped on back into the ever-deepening smoke pall.

At the den they were frightened by the crackle and roar of the main fire, sweeping at wind pace over a broad zone now, but shortly they had seized two more of their younglings and were on their way again to safety...

The fifth and sixth whelps on their way to the river, Metisk and Achak were almost trapped when a fickle wind, common during a fire, hurled flaming mats of grass ahead to touch off new fires wherever the glowing matts dropped.

Choking, at times staggering, the wolf pair battled along a sinuous draw before finding an unfired avenue through which to reach the river bank.

Metisk laid his burden down and spun; there was still a lone whelp at the den!

WILD SAVAGE! Predator! Killer! Metisk and his kind were hunted and destroyed by trapper and ranger, yet in all the wilderness there was no more sagacious pair, no more devoted parents.

As he sped back toward the den area, Metisk was forced to wheel sharply from one side to the other to find small islands of safety, since local eddies caused by the clash of hot and cooler air engaged in a mad sort of fire-bug activity.

His fur was singed and Metisk was obliged to swing in a wide circle in order to get anywhere close to the den, and when at last he came to a skidded halt, and lift his pads by turns from hot ground, he glimpsed through a port in the rolling smoke, the den site. The entire zone was a crackling mass of flame.

He gasped, then gave out strangely whimpered sounds, sounds which often cloyed in his parched throat. He raised a seared paw which trembled with pain as he bobbed his head back and forth, hoping to find some faintly clear avenue through which he might dash, but burning leafmould and grass and small scrub precluded all possibility.

As a local, sere swamp caught fire and roared in wild ecstacy, Metisk spun. Slough grass which, at the close of the last fall season, had reached a height of five feet, now sprang to terrible flaming life, and through its smoke Metisk watched a cock grouse smash to safety through still untouched brush.

There would be no escape for the hen and her hatchlings.

Metisk bunched his long body and leaped away. He would follow the trail of the partridge which would find the least smoke-impregnated area possible.

As he attempted to strike his back trail to the river, Metisk stopped up

short. There was now no avenue. The fire-demons had laid a complete pattern for death over the entire range, forcing Metisk, now in desperation, to swing to the south along a winding draw whose one bank was already aflame.

Though now and then he tanged the inviting sweetness of the river, there was no chance of getting to its near bank... Beyond, Achak and her six whelps were alone and as night added its dark mantle to the smoke-blackened wilderness, Metisk lowered his muzzle to the ground seeking air whose oxygen was not wholly devoured, or impregnated by the sharply acrid smoke fumes.

•

Man-creatures were astir in the grim night. Metisk could hear their voice sounds and the clatter of harness metal as the homesteaders attempted to strike fireguard furrows wherever they could stab a plow point in the ground.

It became necessary for the big wolf to vacate the draw as man outfit was moving along its west bank.

Metisk was forced to leap through light patches of brush whose dry grass had already been lapped clean by the red tide. He gasped when every now and then his pads gave him sharp pain, but his brain was charged with the rallying force of that fundamental endeavor—self-preservation.

Coughing, gasping, dry tongue lolling, he drove gallantly on in his quest of some small slough lake, or tributary creek which might offer a temporary haven.

His sense of smell had been completely nullified, and thus he lost his best guide to water.

At a sharp crackle of brush close in, he whipped to one side, and then he heard deep, guttural voice sounds. He sneezed to clear his nostrils and faintly caught for a brief moment the heavy tang of deer. It was the old muldeer doe that had crashed brush.

She was down on a clear island for the premature borning of her young.

ARMISTICE! Truce! It was not an uncommon state in the wilds in such grave crises as this—in fire or in flood. Metisk was hungry, but his gnawing, growling stomach caused him no concern now. At one powerful slash of his fangs, he could have satisfied all craving for food, and for moisture; but there was a wild code, instinctive, as there was a stronger pull. He was separated from his mate and their young and again the power of a strong fundamental endeavor manifested itself. This was the first time in his matehood with Achak that they had ever become separated in this manner.

He now leaped to a small clearing and the doe grunted with alarm. Her great eyes glowed with strange beauty as she glared up at the big dog wolf, but she was powerless to move to defend herself.

Metisk gaped his jaws and gasped, then turned away. He raised his muzzle and attempted to give out his usual long, high-pitched wail, but his voice sound was at first a hoarse, cloyed, croak, and then at best no sound which penetrated any distance above the roar of the flame gods.

The doe gave out deeply blatted voice sounds, but Metisk paid her no heed. His head was cocked, ears cupped as he listened for an answering call which might lead him to water.

There were no sounds save the gleeful crackle and roar of the fire now at its full peak of devastation—that might well result in grim famine times.

•

Metisk came close to a ponderous old black mother bear, sorrowing at the loss of one of her younglings. She rushed the big wolf, half reared and

struck a terrific blow which, had her great paw contacted, might have smashed his flank. But Metisk whipped to one side, toppling through burnt brush and into hot ash which seared his side and muzzle.

His only way out now was to skirt a flaming meadow which the man-creatures had struggled to save. It was their last bulwark of defense in an attemp to save their homestead yarn.

Metisk could hear them at work as they plowed and backfired, and the sounds frightened him. He swept clear of the flame track, but was forced to hippety-hop over burnt land, until at last he reached a claybank at a haven draw.

He flopped sharply, snuggling his body into cooler clay, thrusting his scorched muzzle gently into crumbling, sandy clay through which filter he breathed purer air.

Now he licked his sore pads for some time, but there was little moisture in his tonguing. He needed water desperately, but there was no chance of picking up that sweet tang, for now the wilderness was an area of multifarious, frightening scents.

As his ears responded sharply to the mad roar and crackle of the fire, and the crash of burnt brush and trees, Metisk sought more safety by burrowing deeper into the sandy clay of his cave. He was dangerously close to the man creatures, yet, at the point of exhaustion, he was forced to cling to this temporary haven which brought him some measure of surcease and rest.

WITH THE coming of a scarcely distinguishable dawn, he rose and stretched himself. The wind had changed a point or two, showing a clear stretch down at the south-westerly neck of the smouldering meadow.

When he glimpsed, through a port in the smoke fog, an outfit of human and horse creatures, he whipped to cover and then a sharp wind blew, and Metisk flung up his head. His nose quivered excitedly, for on the tail of the sudden blustering wind-there came the faint sweet tang of moisture. His almost-spent body tightened and he expressed his sudden surge of ecstacy in a wide grimace as he drew his lips back over his teeth.

Shortly, cautiously hugging a clay bank, until it petered out, he reached a thin strip of gravel bar terrain which was not dangerously hot. Screening himself by a fringe of charred willow and alder scrub, he quickened pace and shortly reached the edge of a small sink, a bowl which once had been the center of a burnt-over tamarac swamp.

•

Peaty turf still burned slowly, but Metisk found island tufts over which he could navigate to the center and then, with a low gasp, he was down digging sharply with his foreclaws, until the muskeg peat began to filter water—slow seepage, but sufficient for his needs.

He thrust his muzzle deep into the ooze, then through clenched teeth began to suck in moisture, until at last his long tongue was lapping, while the quagmire muck cooled his body.

He rolled in the brackish ooze, paddled in it, until his legs and coat were a slimy black.

Suddenly he cocked his head, then whirled. Moving towards him, hippety-hopping from one unburnt clump to another, came two mongrel dogs, whose coats were badly singed. They glimpsed the lone dog-wolf, and snarled as they advanced.

Metisk cast swift glances about him, but the dogs were between him and the only sure avenue of escape. To have broken and run ahead of them, would have meant running a dangerous gauntlet of red hot peat.

Bayed, he lifted his hackles sharply and exposed his fangs in a challenging grin as the lead dog charged.

The big sable and tan mongrel slobbered guttural snarls as he rose, to slash at Metisk's throat, but Metisk only gasped. It was his only voice sound as he bunched his pads under him.

As the gaping jaws of his attacker neared his throat, the big wolf ducked his head, then brought it up with savage suddenness, spilling his enemy. Then like a blurred streak, before the second dog could come in, Metisk's fangs struck downward and sidewise.

The big mongrel yowled with pain, the pain of a torn throat. He staggered to his feet, shaking his head as he throated horrible snarls. Metisk minced on all four paws, his singed brush stiffly out behind.

Suddenly he leaped high, as both dogs converged to attack, and as he flashed by, a set of fangs caught him at the junction of his lips on the near side.

He tasted his own blood and it rallied all his fighting skill and power.

When he wheeled, he feinted, throwing the lesser attacker off, and then he rushed and slashed, in and out... The lead dog was down, yelping, and now Metisk turned to the other.

THE FACE of the big wolf was now a hideous mask as his fangs were exposed, fangs that were stained by his own and the enemy's blood. But the remaining opponent was a creature of the wilderness; this was not his first battle with dog coyote or wolf.

He rushed, and as he closed, he flung himself inside, catching Metisk with a stout shoulder, causing him to loose his footing on the broken peat tufts.

Metisk was down and, growling savagely, the dog creature struck for his throat.

It was fortunate for Metisk that those fangs were not the keen-pointed fangs of an enemy wolf, but duller canines. They penetrated his skin, but Metisk suddenly thrust upward with his strong hind paws. His claws dug and ripped, and with a wild yelp of pain, his attacker rolled clear. Metisk bounded to his feet and coiled, all in the one motion. Throughout all his wilderness career, he had practiced above all else in his plan for battle tactics, timing. It served him well now for, as the mongrel came staggering to his feet, Metisk caught him with well-timed fangs strokes in the neck.

Metisk was ready to rush to deliver the coup de grace, when all at once he heard a frightening whine as something brushed his coat along the tips of his shoulders, and then—sharp, ripping thunder.

It was man-made thunder. It came again and again and as Metisk whirled to bound to scant cover, ashes and tufts of sod were kicked up by striking lead.

Metisk had little cover at his back, but he made the most of it in his wild, zig-zagging flight. He was bound for the fringe of burnt willows, willows already being cut by lead.

Suddenly he whipped to his right and was lost to view over the hump of an age-old beaver-dam...while at his back, the wounded enemy dogs yelped, and the man-creatures roared in their frustration...

•

Separation! He paused every now and then as he followed an old beaver channel which, he sensed, could lead him to water. He paused to cock his head, pricking his ears forward and back, as if with the hope that he might catch a signal wail from Achak.

Now, at a small dry creek wash, he bellied down in a state of complete relaxation. Although the creek bed was dry, it was cool to his pads and belly. In time he moved on and reached a pocket, a sink which was quivering at his approach. He stepped boldly into the ooze and rolled in it, and its cool muck brought relief for the pain of his wounds.

Not for an hour or more did he rise. He lay and blinked, and his sore lips twitched from time to time as he listened to the raging sounds of the fire demons.

BEFORE dusk closed in, to add further gloom to the smoke pall, Metisk rose and stretched his weary form. He no longer bled. His pads had ceased their throbbing, but now he felt another throbbing sensation... It came from his empty, gnawing belly. Hunger-pains assailed him and now he turned to make his way silently along the old wash. Instinctively he sensed that this could be the favorite spot for grouse because along the flat banks there were coverts of willow and alder, and some underscrub, coverts untouched by the fire.

Shortly, Metisk froze to a piece of animate sculpture. From close in there sounded the hollow drumming of a cock-partridge. It was readily identifiable, and Metisk licked his lips with a single flick of his long tongue.

As he listened to that drumfire beat of wings, Metisk's stomach pains intensified, and a dribble of slaver showed at his jaws. During a lull in the hollow drumming, Metisk displaying infinite patience, as he stood; but when the booming resumed, he slowly subsided and, belly down, inched stealthily forward, sliding his body over a fallen log until at last he saw the drumming log, and then the drummer, a handsome cock bird whose feathers were grandiosely fluffed out as he beat his pompous tattoo.

Metisk slid along the leaning old windfall, bunched his paws under him, then catapulted forward and up!

It was over in a flash and Metisk now ravenously stripped feathered skin, spitting it from his teeth.

Shortly he was grunting in ecstacy as he mouthed and gulped the warm succulence of his feast, and as he ground the last vestige of bone, he suddenly started... Raindrops were splashing his face. He rose, whirled, then stretched his powerful limbs by turns, and began to lap at the rain which now trickled down his face.

He leaped to a rise of land and thrust his muzzle high, pouring out a long wail, his first clear-toned cry in some time. And when the last echoes had merged with the rumble and hiss of the counter-attacked fire gods, he cocked his head to glare at the roiling smoke masses as they steamed in the first good rain of the spring season.

•

Throughout the night and all the following day, Metisk was held to cover. The air was thick and heavy with acrid smoke tang as the rain caused a cloying fog over the entire zone.

This morning, a lull came. The air smelt sweeter, and the big wolf bounded high in new found exuberence. Almost before the break of day he had made another kill—a sleeping rabbit.

Now, his nose quivering, he turned to the east, following the creek bed in which puddles had already begun to form.

Toward noon the sun struggled to push through the cloud masses, and succeeded for a few brief moments, but more rain now slanted down.

His brush trailing, his coat clinging tightly to his lean form, Metisk moved steadily on and now increased his pace as he tanged the river.

At the near, high bank, he cocked his head as if in an attempt to orient his position, but this sector was strange country. He was well to the south of the point at which he and Achak had swum the whelps across the stream.

Metisk was forced downstream, for at these high banks the current was swift. He reached a frightening barrier, a wire fence and timorously he bent his body to crawl under the lower strand.

Alien scents now touched his nostrils—the mingled scents of man and

dog creatures, and a faint tang of fresh smoke... Metisk was perilously close to the home yard of a homesteader.

Moving cautiously in behind a screening of sapling cottonwoods, he now slid on down to a flat bank and shortly, muzzle high, his eyelids dashing pelting rain from his eyes, he breasted the current and with powerful paddle strokes soon reached the right bank.

He shook himself vigorously, then turned his grimacing face toward the north.

THE DEVASTATING fire had brought to the wilderness creatures a new scourge—famine. Most of the able predators had crossed the river, causing an exodus of small game creatures, and deer, and now hungry wolves prowled in search of food. The armistice which had been held throughout the dangerous fire period had terminated, and fangs began to clash with ruthless disregard of any wild codes.

As he loped along the highland for the most of a full day, Metisk halted every now and then to cock his head, thrust up his muzzle, and cup his ears, eager to catch a voice sound from his mate.

He searched diligently for her scent, but it was just before dusk that he came to a skidded halt at a wild, high-pitched wail. But his hackles rose as he identified the cry of a she-coyote.

He ran to a hogback ridge and, head high, gave out his own powerful call. Again and again he called, but there was no response.

Now he found a depression, a natural cave caused by an upturned root system. Here, he curled to rest. For an hour or longer he listened to the hiss of rain and wind in the tree tops. Then suddenly he started. The sky was clearing. He rose and stood in the open, and shook his coat. The rain was definitely easing. Then all at once he whirled as out of the clearing night there came the call of Achak!

Metisk whipped to a knoll and gave out an answering call, then at full lope he bounded forward.

He had run nearly a mile before he came to a sharp halt. A small creature stirred ahead. Metisk sniffed sharply, then lunged forward as a small wolfling rolled onto its back, mewling piteupusly. She was one of Metisk and Achak's litter.

Metisk tongued the little one gently, then was brought sharply about by a clear cry from close in. It was Achak's cry of alarm, distress.

The big wolf seized the young one in his jaws, and carried her to a covert, where he gently laid her down.

He stood a brief moment or two as if hesitant to leave this little one unprotected. But his heart suddenly quickened its beat and his hackles rose.

With a sharp gasp, he broke into a full run.

FOUR CRINGING whelps were at Achak's back was with fangs bared she stood at bay. A huge, bachelor dog-wolf minced choppily toward her, weaving in a half circle and back, but always tightening the circle.

A half moon lazed on its back to cast an eerie spotlight on the terrain as Achak swayed on all paws in her mounting agitation.

Her face was hideous in its battle grimace. Blood dripped from a fang slash in the near side of her face, but she stood at bay, prepared to defend her young ones to the death.

It was thus Metisk found her.

The big, half starved stranger wolf which had broken a strong code of the wilds, had already attacked, and had felt the tear of Achak's fangs, was now creeping in, his body half bunched to attack.

Snakelike, the wind in his favor, Metisk crept stealthily forward. One of Achak's whelps was moving out in front of her, his little muzzle cocked, to sniff the big stranger.

Metisk licked his chops, and bristled his hackles as he slid through the cover of light brush; and now he saw Achak's

muzzle rise, and her nose quiver. She had caught his scent on a shifting wind.

Wisely, Achak gave out no signal. Instead, she peeled back her lips and gasped and her swaying from side to side intensified. She was watching closely the little whelp now starting to creep toward the big killer.

Achak was ready to hurl herself forward at any split moment, should the big one attack her whelp.

Suddenly the strange wolf bunched and leaped, and synchronizing his own timing with the stranger's, Metisk hurled his long powerful body in.

The stranger skidded on slippery underfooting, and then Metisk struck!

Achak seized her young one and thrust him back with his family members, then whirled, for the stranger wolf had recovered and was hurtling in to counter-attack Metisk.

Metisk parried a rush with a shoulder; then quickly he struck a slanting fang stroke which ripped the enemy's near flank.

In hatred and frustration, the alien wolf now swung and centered an attack on Achak. She slipped on a patch of greasy clay and was down. Fangs were at her throat when Metisk leaped high, and hurled himself in with all his force. The stranger toppled over, and was rolling toward a fringe of light scrub brush when Metisk followed in.

It was done in a flash—a flash of terrible fangs in the moonlight, and now Metisk backed from his enemy and twitched his lips in a horrible grimace.

Achak backed slowly, timorously, to her whelps and crouched. Metisk was in savage mood. But now he wheeled abruptly and bounded to a knoll, from whose top he gave out a wild cry of challenge and of warning.

He stood long moments in the moonlight, head up, ears cocked, ready to respond to any counter challenge, but there was a grim silence on the hinterland. Snuffling, clearing his nostrils, Metisk now turned and trotted back to flop to rest close to his mate and whelps. But he was not there long. He suddenly twisted and bounded to his feet. He bounded on toward the covert at which he had cached the wandering youngling, and shortly he was back, to lay the mewling little one inside Achak's curled forelegs.

ACHAK lay contentedly on her side, while her ravenous whelps nursed, and Matisk watched through eyes whose lights changed from cold yellow to red, a flame of conquest which expressed his contentment at this wild reunion.

When at last the whelps rolled away to curl up and snore, Achak slid along to her mate's side, to tongue his muzzle.

Metisk gasped, and ran the flat of his underjaw along her back; but now he pushed her from him and she returned to her younglings, to settle to rest while Metisk, the great one, kept his sharp vigil throughout the remainder of the night.

With the coming of daybreak, he would bound away to search for food for his mate and then—a new range must be found, a range which would serve them until Nature had restored their old hunting grounds with healing.

Though his eyes blinked, and now and then his head sagged, not for a single moment did Mestik relax his vigilance as the night deepened and softened, leaving the wilderness creatures to sorrow or to lave their hurts and tend their young.

Coming Next Issue

PISTOL PRODIGAL

An Exciting Feature Novel

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A TEXAS MAN SPELLS TROUBLE

✶ ✶ by Ben Smith ✶ ✶

Bob Howdon had a memory — one of flour and a woman. Now he had to forget the image and fight for his life. Things puzzled him until the memory disappeared, and, in its place, came a thought of a man and another woman.

WE CERTAINLY looked inoffensive enough, until you noticed his eyes. There was something lifeless about them, as if the soul behind them had looked upon the world, found nothing to its liking, and moved on.

He rode slip-hipped in the saddle, one foot out of the stirrup, his sombrero pulled down in front to shade his lean face. It was because his eyes were in the shadow that the man who waited for him decided to throw his bluff.

As far as that went, Sheriff Mason was all front. He was capable in his handling of drunks and in breaking up dog fights. Outside of that, his was a serio-comic figure of little importance around Sweetwater.

"H'yah, stranger," Mason said, swinging his bay so that the sunlight would reveal the star upon his chest. The slim stranger looked for a long time at that five-pointed blob of light, then slowly shook his head. "I don't allow it would," he said.

"Would what?"

"I was just wonderin' if a slug from a .44 would push that star clean through your fat guts. Don't reckon it would."

There was a chill in his voice, as if it had been blown across ice. He slipped his free foot back into the hooded stirrup, leaned forward, his hands together on the high horn of his saddle. Mason's eyes shifted from the stranger's face to the black butted Colts that hung in the tied-down holsters and then back again.

"You just passin' through?" Mason asked.

"My business."

"No offense, stranger." Mason's voice trailed away, leaving an awkward silence. "Thought, maybe, you'd

be comin' to see Les Howdon.."

"And...?"

"Well, he'd be a good man to see."

"If I don't?"

The stranger lifted his head and for the first time Mason saw those dead-alive eyes. Nervously he backed his mount a few paces, widening the distance between his vulnerable stomach and the stranger's guns. "No offense," he said again.

Abruptly, Mason was riding away, back toward the shacks that marked the outskirts of Sweetwater. It was time to find Les Howdon and tell the Slant-H owner that the man Howdon had waited for for five years was here. For Mason had no doubt that the stranger was Les Howdon's son...

BOB HOWDON sat upon his black gelding for long moments after Mason had vanished. As he rolled a cigarette, some of the menace seemed to leave his eyes, leaving his face strangely soft, and the etched lines disappeared from the corners of his wide mouth. For that instant, his face was a friendly face, yet retaining the craggy cast of some inner purpose.

"Moonshine," he told the flick-eared gelding, "I should be ashamed of myself. Now, I scared that she'ff plumb out of his pants."

He left the narrow road, breaking through the knee-high sage that lay alongside, and headed east at right angles to the trail to Sweetwater.

He rode as a man might who has once been familiar with the country but has long since forgotten every twist and turn of the hills and valleys. As his black topped the ridges, he kept watch to the westward, in the direction of the town, for surely Mason would waste no time in spreading the news around.

Bob Howdon was no fool. He knew full well that his life might be forfeit for his termerity in returning to this range. And, he was certain that no welcome awaited him at the log ranch house of the Slant-H.

For, eight years ago, Bob Howdon had left the northern end of the Oklahoma Territory to run away to Texas where he had ably fought for the Grand Army of the Republic. He had worn the cadet gray of the Confederacy, while his father, too old for war, had furnished beef to the Union. Beyond his father's disappointment in his son, there were men in the Territory that carried their emotions further into open hatred of both the now-dead Confederacy and men from Texas. For it was a saying, and a true one, that a Texas man spells trouble.

For five years after the Civil War, there had been Texas men, hungry, poorly clothed except for the guns they wore, who had pushed cattle through the Oklahoma Territory into Kansas, gambling against the Union sympathyzers and the Indians. Wagering their cattle and their courage for gold to rehabilitate Texas.

Bob Howdon, too, had ridden the cattle trails through the Territory....

HE HAD BEEN aware, for the past quarter of an hour, that two horses were paralleling his trail. They were on the other side of a pine-topped ridge and the screening trees prevented sight of their riders, but the occasional click of a shod hoof against stone was clearly heard. First, the surreptitious sound would be slightly ahead, toward the east, then again at right angles. That would mean at least two, riding about twenty yards apart.

It must have been the leader of the pair that slammed a shot at Bob Howdon.

In one fluid motion, Howdon was off his gelding, but the horse was walking on, behind the shelter of a limestone ledge. Howdon crouched, his Colts muzzle-cocked toward the peak of the rise, his eyes coming completely alive and watchful. A wisp of smoke curled lazily from above a clump of sumac, hanging threadlike in the still air.

Abruptly, the clatter of hooves, fading...

Cursing silently, Howdon sidled crab-wise to a more secure position, finding a seat upon a fallen log, and waited.

For it was an old bushwhacker's trick, this shooting and running, leaving another man to watch. In that way, should the first shot go wild, the victim would be easy prey for the second man in the ambush. Only one man in a thousand, upon hearing the receding hoofbeats, would know that he was still not safe.

Howdon's patience was rewarded by the tentative sound of a boot upon shale. Just over the rise, barely a hundred feet away, someone was quietly walking.

The black-butted Colts swung eagerly, as if seeking with their gaping muzzles. Behind them, the cold grey eyes of the man from Texas waited. A patch of blue through the underbrush. Denim. Howdon waited. Another time, and nearer, was the check of a linsey shirt. Then the full form of the stalker came into view.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," Howdon said, standing. "I figured this for an ambush." His .44s were casually held, muzzles toward the ground.

The girl swiveled, regarded him with startled eyes. Her lips were parted in astonishment and color worked its way from the neck of her open shirt to her cheeks. Her hair, falling from the confinement of a wide-brimmed hat, was shot with sun-glints. In her slim hands was an old Sharps needle gun.

"I thought...I..." she motioned toward the end of the valley. "He didn't hit you?" She was having difficulty realizing that the first bushwhack shot had failed to find a target yet, oddly, Howdon did not believe that there was any menace in the girl herself.

Howdon said: "Do I look hit?"

"No."

"Were you aimin' to do somethin' about it?" Howdon's voice was lazy, disinterested.

Suddenly, she sat upon the flat lip of a rock and regarded him with wide eyes. "Damn that Trotter," she said.

"He the one who was ahead?"

"Yes. That is...he didn't know I was following." She stopped in apparent confusion. "I didn't want him to kill anyone."

"He hasn't," Howdon replied dryly. "Yet."

He waited, then, seeing that she was going to remain silent, he added, "Why did he try to shoot me?"

"I don't know." There was honesty in her denial, yet Howdon had the sensation of something hidden. What she had said was the truth, yet she had left something unuttered. He walked the few feet to his waiting horse, returned, leading the animal.

"How far have you followed Trotter?" Howdon asked suddenly.

"All the way from Sweet..."

"So? The she'ff is the man who sicced him on me?"

"I didn't say that."

"You might as well. Never mind. I was thinkin' that way anyhow. The she'ff is the only man who knew I was about. Seems to me that tells the story."

She looked up at him, her fingers nervously pleating a fold in her cotton trousers. She was dressed as a man, scuffed boots, open shirt and battered flat-crowned hat, but, subtly, her womanhood was accentuated by the fit of her clothing. Howdon suddenly found himself interested. Who was she? New blood more than likely. There had been none like her in the Territory eight years before. He was about to ask her name, when she seemingly anticipated his question.

"Who are you?" she queried. "What are you doing here?"

But, Howdon was aboard his gelding and was riding on. For his eyes, lightened for a moment, were now the hard-gray of stone and the lines were deep around his mouth. His face

seemed to say, here is a woman, such a woman as any man would want. But, I have no place in my life for a woman—yet.

HE HEARD the sound of hooves behind him; knew that she had mounted and was following; but he did not look back. There was only one way, that was forward. For this was a narrow, crooked trail Howdon was riding and there was no room in which to turn around. It was as if his life was fastened to a stretched steel cable, leading...where?

To that question, even Bob Howdon did not know the complete answer.

Still, she had disturbed Howdon. The sight of her after the years of loneliness had done something to him and for an instant he wondered if his way was the right way. Perhaps it would be better to turn off, now, before it was too late. For, even if a Texas man spelled trouble, he was not omnipotent. He could die, just as easily as another, under the guns of an enemy.

And in his mind was the picture of a chuck wagon, the canvas top torn by bullets, the driver rising suddenly to fall behind the frightened horses and, incongruously, the flour that had trickled from a shattered barrel.

He shook his head, his eyes momentarily blinded by anger.

Straight ahead, over the tag-ends of the mountains, lay the valley of the Slant H. In his mind's eye, Howdon could yet see it; the fetlock high fine grass, the gently rolling land, locked in by the towering hills and bisected by the waters of Sweet Creek. Almost there, Howdon reined in and studied the trail before him. From a cross valley he could see a wide scar in the grass. Like a phantom road, it ran to the left, dipped into a ford at the shallow Sweet, then angled toward the Kansas line.

It was the old cattle trail, the route taken by Texas drovers fighting their beef through to Independence and the Verdigris River.

It was along this route that Bob Howdon rode until he reached a knoll perhaps five miles from the Slant-H ranch house proper. Beside the now-dim trail, there was a mound of stone and it was here that Howdon dismounted. He was aware that the girl still followed him, that her bay was breaking from cover a hundred yards behind, swinging eagerly through the short grass.

A slab of limestone had been erected at the head of the grave and the wind and rain of two years had barely dimmed the legend inscribed thereon—T-Bar, and the date, 1868.

There was no name and for Howdon, there never needed to be a name. For Texas men knew the one who slept there in the alien Territory earth. It was thus proper that a Texas man should exact vengeance.

"Some of your kin?" the girl's voice was sympathetic, and she remained a respectful distance behind Howdon. She was trying to be friendly, that he knew, and he was full of anger that he should resent her friendliness here in a country where every man was his enemy.

"Might have been," he replied. With the toe of his boot he replaced a stone that had slipped from the hummock of the grave. Then, looking slantwise into her face, he said, "I'm obliged to you—about back yonder. Wouldn't many worry whether I was alive or dead. Why should you?"

SHE WAITED before answering and Howdon kenw that she was weighing him in her mind. Finally, reaching some sort of decision, she said. "Because I hate Trotter. Ben Trotter. I would fight him in anything he tried to do."

"Trotter, who is he?"

"He's the foreman at the Slant H."

So, Howdon mused, *here it is again. The ugly pattern.* For the Slant H was responsible for the grave at his feet. And, since his father, Les Howdon, owned the Slant H, his father was responsible for the ambush that

had scattered the Bar T cattle to hell and gone and had meant the death of the driver of the chuck wagon. Most of the beef, of course, had been rounded up again, but there was no way to loop on a fading life...

"What did Trotter do to you?" he asked.

She sat down on an outcropping of rock, holding her reins in her hand. Her bay bent its neck and touched her shoulder, leaving a dark patch of slobber on the faded linsey shirt. Howdon, rolling a smoke, watched the emotion play in her face.

"I'm Madge Evans," she said. "The only Evans that's left, for that matter. At first there was Dad and my brother." She stopped, looking toward the blue line of the hills. "The graves are back there," she went on. "That was eight months ago. Since then I've given up the homestead and moved back into Sweetwater. I don't know why I didn't go farther; leave this country completely. Maybe, it's pride. Maybe, it's because I want to be here when someone kills Ben Trotter."

"Thought a man named Howdon owned the Slant H," he ventured. "How come he lets Trotter do these things?"

"I don't know, unless Trotter does them on his orders. All I do know is that there has been a constant fight to drive anyone out of the valley who might come in. It's almost as if the Slant H is doing something that must be hidden, outside of the killing. I never saw Les Howdon but Trotter is always backed by some of the Slant H riders when he makes his play. There were six of them the night Dad and Bud were killed. They...they didn't have a chance..."

"Good odds for Trotter," Howdon murmured. "Six to three."

"Before it was over," Madge told him, "it was four to three. I got one with my Sharps."

What sort of courage was this, Howdon wondered, that enabled this girl to speak so calmly of an experience so bitter? Then, he knew. In a land like this, there is no double standard. Men and women both must fight and accept the consequences of that fighting.

"Trotter," he said, "he hasn't troubled you since?"

"No. Maybe it's because, back in Sweetwater I'm no menace to whatever it is he is doing. Mason, that's the Sheriff and Trotter's man, tries to keep an eye on me."

He walked to his horse, slipping one foot into the stirrup, taking a quick step as the black skittered sidewise.

"I reckon you ought to know," he said bitterly, "that I'm Les Howdon's son."

He was totally unprepared for the change in her. She had been sitting, calmly surveying the valley before them, her face beautiful in repose. At his words, anger swept across her features, meeting the lines of sorrow near her eyes.

"You...you...I might have known." The Sharps was steady in her hands, the yawning bore centered upon Howdon's belt buckle. "You're another of them," she snapped. "Another of the Slant H wolves. Get away from here and back into hell with your kind..."

"Wait. Don't forget Trotter."

Her eyes were suspicious. "What about him?"

"He took a shot at me. Does that look like I'm his friend?"

"I don't know," she was evidently undecided, her anger at odds with her desire to believe him. Suddenly the calm she had been forcing deserted her and she ran awkwardly to her horse, grasping for the horn of her saddle. As she rode precipitiously through the short grass toward the west, Howdon saw that her face was wet with tears.

"Moonshine," he muttered to the back-slanted ears of his gelding, " 'Pears it's about time we looked up a few men that have lived long

enough. First, it'll be Ben Trotter."

ODDLY ENOUGH, it was Ben Trotter who looked Howdon up first. For some reason, perhaps because he was thinking of the past more than the present, Howdon allowed his guard to relax and thus fell victim to the trap.

He rode between a neck in the valley, with heavy timber standing at either hand, his horse walking the gravel bank of Sweet Creek. Just ahead, past the pinch, the valley widened into the Slant H range proper.

As Bob Howdon came from between the barriers of undergrowth, six riders closed in from his flanks. He made no move for the tied-down Colts at his thighs for he saw that the springing of the trap was complete. Guns were out of leather and he was the center of a ominous ring of gaping muzzles. The leader of the group, a heavy man with a red-veined nose, grinned at Howdon, revealing short, blunt teeth.

Howdon said, looking at him. "You missed me awhile ago."

Ben Trotter laughed. "Didn't aim to do no more than warn you back," he explained. "Thought you'd have the sense to know you're not wanted. We don't like Texas men in this country."

Howdon smiled thinly, hiding his eyes beneath the drooping brim of his sombrero. "We must wear our brand plain," he said. "Or, is it because we look like *men?*"

Trotter rode in, his dappled mount skittish, swiping at Howdon with his gun-laden hand. Swinging his head, Howdon ducked the blow that would have laid his face open to the bone. Then, he reached for Trotter. While the man was extended from his lunge, his weight thrown to the near side of his saddle, Howdon caught his arm and pulled. Trotter hit the ground like an empty feed sack, his legs twisting beneath him. From that position, he threw a shot at Howdon which passed through the limp brim of Howdon's sombrero, fanning hot air in Howdon's lean face.

One of the other riders, a thin plank of a man, wiped his nose on the back of his hand, then rubbed his hand on his dirty pants. "Wait a minute, Ben," he said, softly and Howdon noticed that the thin man's gun was in a position to cover both Howdon and Trotter.

"Hell, Slats..."

"Shut up, Trotter. You know what Mason said."

"Mason don't run this outfit," Trotter said, getting to his feet. "I do."

Slats looked at him for a long moment.

"Yeah," he said, finally. "But, Mason's right. Les Howdon's young-'un is just what we need to finish the job. Use your head and save your cartridges I always say."

Ben Trotter, apparently over his sudden anger at Howdon, swung heavily back into the saddle and led the group northward. Howdon, looking from the corners of his eyes, watched the remaining five spread around him, two on each side and one trailing. These were experienced men; dangerous men. They rode in such a manner that never would Howdon be able to get them all under his guns. And, there would be one of them ready and able to shoot him in the back should Howdon make a move for his Colts.

"Can a man ask where we're headed?" Howdon queried of no one in particular.

"You can ask," Slats replied. "Maybe, though, you don't get an answer."

"It don't make any difference," Trotter looked over his shoulder at Howdon. "We're heading for the Slant H."

Howdon said, Cheerfully. "That's where I was goin' anyway."

"That's where you started," Slats corrected him calmly. "Only you didn't figure on finishin' the trip like you're going to."

Bob Howdon rode along since, at

that moment, it well suited his purpose to be taken to the Slant H. For it was there that the answers to his questions might be found. It was hard to believe that the once honest, though stern, old cowman who was his father could be guilty of backing such a man as Ben Trotter in his program of intimidation in this valley. Disagree though they might, Bob and Les Howdon could but be guilty of being fixed in principle.

BOB'S MIND went back, to that day almost two years before when the Bar T herd had been ambushed just past the shallows of Sweet creek. The attack had come suddenly and had been cleverly engineered. Catching the Bar T riders and the herd in a narrow valley, the Texans had been exposed to a deadly fire from the ridges. It was surprising that all of them had not been killed in that engagement.

But, of all of them to catch a bushwhacker bullet, it had to be the owner of the Bar T...

Bob Howdon fought the chill that seemed to spread from the pit of his stomach. Sorrow was his, deep sorrow, but it must never temper the fierce anger he held against the men of the Slant H. Even Les Howdon, should he be involved, must die. Yet, Bob Howdon knew that even if all the men in the Territory should pay for that ambush in blood, the ache in his heart would never be eased.

Bob Howdon was a man fighting, not against an enemy, but against a memory...

And, remembering, Bob was confused to find that Madge Evans, the girl who had ridden with him to the lonely grave near Sweet Creek, was still in his mind.

"We're here," Trotter said quite unnecessarily and Bob Howdon looked up. There was the teetery corral fence just ahead, the long bunkhouse, the rambling ranchhouse. It was all as he had left it and Howdon was amazed that the eight years had apparently brought no change in the Slant H.

Trotter dismounted, leading his horse toward the pole fence. "Take him in the bunkhouse," he directed. "See that he stays there."

Unless it had been altered, Bob Howdon knew that once inside the log building and with the door guarded, he would most certainly remain. For the bunkhouse had been built in the years before when the Indians were a menace and, therefore, had no windows. Rather, at four foot intervals, there were slits for gun barrels. It would, he decided, make a proper jail.

So now, before they closed in on him and took his guns, before they made him prisoner in the nigh escape-proof bunkhouse, was the time to play out the string.

From the corner of his eye, Howdon saw that his captors were confident. Of the five of them, only Slats was watching. Trotter had vanished around the corner of the building, on his way to the ranch house.

"Get down," Slats said quietly, holding his Peacemaker at an angle, the muzzle skyward.

Bob Howdon kicked his feet free of the covered Texas stirrups and slid to the ground. Only one other man remained with Slats. The rest of them were dismounting, leading their horses toward the corral.

Ducking his head, gathering his long legs under him, Howdon sprang sideways, his hands angling downward to the butts of his Colts. Before Slats could bring his own gun to bear, Howdon was under and on the other side of his black gelding and through the bunkhouse door. As he whipped his lean body around the slab door facing, he snapped a shot at Slats' companion and was gratified to see that he had not missed. The rider folded lowly in the saddle, his chest resting for a brief moment on the flat saddle horn. Then, twisting from the back of his plunging, frightened mount, he slipped to the ground.

As the horse lifted its head and buckjumped away, red blood spread in an ugly patch upon the saddle..

Then all hell broke loose.

SLAT'S PEACEMAKER thundered, and bark flew from the slab lintel, to strike Howdon in the face. With an outthrust boot, Howdon slammed the door, dropping the heavy crossbar into its sockets. Gunfire rattled and lead stitched an untidy row of holes in the scantling door.

Grinning, Howdon ran across the bunkhouse and peered from a slit that faced the house. From the veranda, Trotter was staring, startled by the thundering guns. Then, awkwardly in his high-heeled boots, the Slant H foreman came running across the yard.

Bob Howdon leveled the barrel of his .44 through the slit in the logs and squeezed off a shot in Trotter's direction, saw Trotter stumble, drop his gun and clutch his shoulder. Upon the faded surface of his shirt, a red rose slowly bloomed. Recovering, Trotter backed awkwardly to the protection of the veranda and vanished inside the house.

"Just wait," Howdon said, "it'll be your time, directly."

Gunfire rattled anew from the direction of the corral and Howdon saw that Slats and three others were working their way nearer, taking advantage of the cover of the watering tough which they were pushing ahead of them. The trough was heavy, made of water-logged oak, and Howdon knew would be as efficient against a .44 slug as three inches of iron.

Therefore, he waited.

As the quartet worked nearer the bunkhouse, the trough angled somewhat and Howdon could see a blue clad leg in the ranch yard dust. Taking a long sight he gently inched back the trigger and saw dirt spray over the exposed leg. However, it was quickly drawn from sight and in the dust where it had been became a dark stain.

It was then that Howdon smelled the smoke. Cursing himself for his preoccupation with the four men in the yard, he sprinted toward the end of the long bunkhouse. Someone, perhaps Trotter deserting the safety of the big house, had fired an old bunch of oak shakes against the side of the tindery log building. Even as Howdon watched, helpless, fire licked through a gap in the chinking and touched off the dry wood on the inside.

"Come on out," someone bawled, punctuating his invitation with a screaming slug that sprinkled hard mud over Howdon's boots.

Howdon, hie eyes to a gun slit, saw a man running around the bunkhouse toward the blazing end. Howdon slapped a quick slug in the runner's direction, saw him come unjointed and sprawl on his face on the sun-baked earth.

Calmly, Howdon punched new loads in his right hand Colt. That made two down and one, no, two injured. He risked a quick glance behind him, estimated. In ten miutes the whole bunkhouse would be an inferno. Whatever he was going to do, he had best do it quickly.

A GUN BELLOWED and Howdon felt the tearing pain of a slug in his upper arm. Under cover of the excitement, one of the Slant H men had crept close and fired through a gun slit. Howdon lifted his arm, felt no grating of the bone. Not broken, simply torn through the muscle. He holstered one Colt and held the other in his good right hand.

Suddenly, like the boom of thunder in a summer sky, there was a sullen roar and something struck a rock in the yard to go skyward, screaming in its passage like a thousand devils. Again the heavy long gun thundered and a man stood up from his barricade behind the watering trough and danced a dervish step in the sunlight. When he turned, Howdon could see that his face was gone...

Slats and one companion broke and, under Howdon's rapid fire, ran for the house. On the way they picked up Trotter who had been lurking under a bunkhouse gun slit. Firing steadily, Howdon fought his reeling senses, try-

ing to down at least one of them before they reached safety.

Then the long gun spoke again and there was authority in its voice. Slats, his fingers clawing at the hole where his stomach had been, sprawled down the veranda steps. Howdon, watching, saw the door slam shut behind Trotter's beefy back.

"Hello, in the bunkhouse," came a high voice. "You better get out before you burn out..."

It was Madge Evans, her old Sharps in her hand, riding into the ranch yard. Howdon walked slowly toward her, keeping the logs of the bunkhouse between him and his remaining enemies.

"I'm beholden to you," he said simply. "But I thought you'd be back in Sweetwater."

"I started back," she admitted, odd flecks of excitement showing in her hazel eyes. "But, I changed my mind. If you were going to fight the whole Slant H, the least I could do was lend a hand."

Sliding off her horse, she led him to the comparative safety of the barn and there bound up his injured arm. Resting in the coolness, Howdon felt some of the nausea leave him.

"There's Trotter, maybe one more in the big house," he said. "Directly I'll go see."

"No."

"That's what I came here for."

"You'd be a fool to go up against Trotter, maybe Les Howdon, them in the safety of the house. You'd never cross the yard."

"I don't think Trotter can count on Dad," Howdon said. "Whatever else he may have done, he can't be low enough to gun down his own flesh and blood." He stared moodily at the motes of dust lazing in the shaft of sunlight that came through a hole in the barn roof. "Or, maybe he would. Got to where I don't know anything for sure."

MADGE WAS sitting on an upended empty powder keg, her heavy rifle near her knee. Howdon realized that she was regarding him rather strangely. "Why are you so bitter?" she asked.

"You know why," his voice was hard. "The Slant H, my father's brand, ambushed us at Sweet Creek. There's a grave there to prove it."

"Only one grave," Madge reminded him.

Howdon stood up, looking to the loading of his guns. When he spoke, his voice was oddly soft. "That grave," he said, "is the grave of a woman, Joyce Edwards. She owned the Bar T."

Slowly, as if he were walking for a drink of water, Howdon paced into the ranch yard, scorning the cover of the bunkhouse. Behind him, Madge Evans went to her knees in the dirt, propping her Sharps over a fallen corral pole. Its open bore was pointing toward the gaping big house windows.

Howdon walked on, feeling the heat of the sun against his back, feeding his anger on the throbbing of his injured arm, remembering.

There was a clatter of metal against wood and a shutter was driven from a window. A gun bellowed and lead screamed into the logs of the barn. Howdon answered the fire, driving splinters from the sill of the window into the room beyond. Behind him, to his left, the needle gun blasted and someone in the big house cursed impotently.

Howdon stopped, a scant twenty feet from the veranda, holding his .44 loosely in his good right hand. "Trotter," he called. "Ben Trotter! Come out of there, Trotter."

"I'll see you in hell!"

Trotter rose from behind the window, a hulking shadow, blood streaming from a cut over his eye. Before he could level his hand gun, the Sharps bellowed again and a chunk of wood as big as a man's hand jumped from the sill.

Trotter cursed and ducked backward to safety, his gun flaming as he

drove a slug harmlessly into the sky.

"Come out of there, Trotter," Howdon shouted again.

There was then a silence as deep as death itself. Seconds were knitted into minutes and Howdon waited, muting the rasping of his own breathing lest he miss the slightest sound from the interior of the house. Suddenly, the strangest thing of all happened.

Within the house, out of the range of Howdon's vision, gunfire thundered. Three...four...then another shot. A man screamed in pain and Trotter lurched through the door and onto the veranda. Blood stained his shirt front and his empty fingers clawed at the gaping wound in his chest. He fell, trailing down the steps, his shoulders resting in the dust.

Howdon bent over him, gun ready, and saw that Ben Trotter was swinging into the saddle for the last time; mounting the black horse that is Death...

"Almost did it..." Trotter breathed.... "If you hadn't come along...think of all that money. Almost...mine...damn!" Trotter's voice was suddenly clear. "Man from Texas is nothing but...trouble."

He died.

HOWDON straightened slowly, suddenly weary, aware that some one else was watching, was near him. It was Madge, her slim hand upon his good arm. But, Howdon saw, she was not looking at Trotter; her eyes were upward, in terror, directed toward the big house.

Looking there, Bob Howdon saw his father, a gun dangling from a limp hand, faltering at the edge of the first step.

"Bob," Les Howdon called, his face turning aimlessly about the yard. "Where are you, Bob?"

His voice suddenly gentle, Bob Howdon answered.

"Here, Dad." And he walked slowly toward the blind man.

"When you left me," Les Howdon said, "Trotter was the man I had to turn to. He misled me."

"But...your eyes..."

"Soon after you left. A horse threw me. That's why I had to have Trotter. It was his idea to gain control of the valley, so that when the railroad reached Independence we would be the only supply of beef for the section crews. But Trotter went too far. He tried to steal from the Texas drovers. Bob, I didn't know that. Trotter told me all about it, in the house."

Bob Howdon was close now, and his father's fingers fastened to the sleeve of his son's shirt as if he never intended releasing him. "I'm glad you're back, son," he said. He laughed, bitterly. "Trotter didn't know I had a gun," he said. "I fired at the sound of his voice, three times. Must have hit him."

"You did," Bob Howdon said simply. "He's dead."

Then, as if tired, Les Howdon sank to his knees upon the veranda, his blind eyes toward the sun, then fell, his bearded cheek against the rough planking.

"He'll live," Madge Evans said. "There's nothing much wrong with him except Trotter's starving him. The poor old man."

AND BOB HOWDON realized then that his father was guilty of nothing except fighting for that which he thought was right. And, after all, was that not what every man should do? The rest of it, all the ugly dream, had been Trotter's and he was now dead.

"There'll be people in Texas who'll want to know," Bob Howdon said slowly. "Seems like I ought to be ridin' back soon as he can travel. But, what'll you do?"

"Me?" Madge Evans looked up at him in some surprise. "You won't stay here? At the Slant H?"

He said awkwardly. "No. I'll never come back. Y'see, there's a ghost here. I was the Bar T trail boss when Trot-

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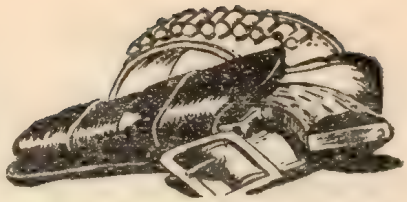
Mitigating Circumstances



Judge Wardlow Steele had to learn his profession as he went along . . .

By Lon Williams

HOOKER MARTIN, known also as Spoonbill, considered himself a pretty smart man, especially in legal matters. Accordingly, when Flat Creek citizens decided to give up Vigilante methods, and proceed according to law, Spoonbill had been a candidate for judge. He wasn't elected, of course, not being one of what was getting to be called *the better element*. Nevertheless, he was determined to make his influence felt, and when law-and-order forces put two of his old cronies on trial for murder, Spoonbill managed to get himself put on top list for jurors.

As Jerd Buckalew, newly-elected sheriff, banged for order with his .45, Hook Martin was right up front in Flat Creek's log court house.

"Court's now in session," Jerd shouted; "anybody disturbin' this court will be locked up."

Here and there on split-log benches, and in standing spaces, whiskered men snickered in their beards. Law-abiding citizens maintained proper solemnity, but made sure they'd brought along their hoglegs, Colts, bowie-knives, and derringers.

Judge Wardlow Steele, a big, raw-boned miner with straw-colored mustache and savage blue eyes, spat into a sandbox. "Clerk will call first case."

Jim Skiffington, a slim man in spectacles and black suit, stood up. "People versus Burke Lassell and Manker Lewis," he shouted. "Charge, first-degree murder."

Deputy-sheriffs ushered Lassell and Lewis to a split-log table up front and shoved them down on a bench.

"You skunks got a lawyer?" growled Judge Steele.

"Yes, your honor," said a long-legged, long-faced gent, who rose from a front corner, came over and stood by Lassell and Lewis. "I'm French Demeree. I was an attorney-at-law back in my native Tennessee; these prisoners spoke to me about defending them."

"All right," snapped Steele. He glanced about. "Whar's our man?"

At a second split-log table, a square-bodied hardcase with red hair stood up. "Here, your honor."

"Shore," said Judge Steele. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Claybrook, for not seein' you fust off. Well, now, Wade, you bein' prosecutor, what do we do next?"

"Prisoners are required to plead," Wade Claybrook answered, and resumed his seat.

"All right, you varmints," growled Steele. "Start pleadin'."

Lawyer Demeree got up. "Defendants plead not guilty, your honor."

"Thunderation!" Steele shouted; "of course they're guilty."

Prosecutor Claybrook got up. "It's

"By thunder, Mr. Lawyer, I ought to have your head pulled off!"

a manner of pleading, your honor. In court trials, it's necessary to prove 'em guilty before a jury."

"Oh, so they're darin' us to prove it, eh? Well, by thunder, we can shore do it; whar's our witnesses?"

Claybrook got up again. "Next matter is selection of a jury, your honor. That's Sheriff Buckalew's job. Names are already drawn; clerk Skiffington will call them."

"All right, Skiffy," said Judge Steele; "start callin'."

Skiffy called, "Sam Proudfit."

"Here," Hook Martin said to himself, "is where I come in." He was sitting just behind defense lawyer French Demeree. Hook leaned forward and tapped Demeree's shoulder.

Demeree twisted around. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm Hooker Martin, a friend of these gents; you don't want Sam Proudfit on no jury."

"Why not?"

"He's a Vigilante; don't believe in trials."

Demeree stood up as Proudfit took a jury seat. "Peremptory challenge, your honor."

JUDGE STEELE'S bushy eyebrows lifted. He looked around from one court official to another; nobody's face showed any light. He kept looking until he espied a face some distance back that inspired hope. "Bill Hacker, come up here."

A six-footer wearing a couple of

sixguns stood up. He was a dark-haired hombre with glinting dark eyes and close-cut mustache. "Coming, Judge."

Bill Hacker came forward and stepped up beside Judge Steele.

"Look here, Bill," Steele whispered. "I warn't cut out for this job and you know it; set down here and tell me what to do."

Hacker eased down onto Steele's bench. "I'd sort of hoped I was through with hanging criminals, Judge. A year as Vigilante chief has fed me up with it."

"You ought to been judge," said Steele; "you got education. Now tell me what that axe-faced lawyer means by 'primptry challenge'."

"He means he objects to having Sam Proudfit as a juror."

"Can he do that?"

"He can object to as many as six, without telling why; from then on, he's got to have a good reason."

Judge Steele leaned forward. "All right, Demeree, Proudfit is off. Next name, Skiffy."

"Jinks Palmer, alias Palmleaf Palmer."

Hook Martin tapped Demeree's shoulder. "Jinks is on our side."

Palmer took his place as a juror and Skiffy called, "Noah Bigsby."

Hook tapped Demeree. "Bigsby won't do."

"Why?"

"He's a Vigie."

Demeree got up. "Challenge Bigsby, your honor."

"Ask him why," Bill Hacker whispered to Steele.

"What fer?" Judge Steele demanded of lawyer Demeree.

"He's a Vigilante."

"That," stormed Judge Steele, "is about as sorry a excuse as I ever heard; we ought to have a dozen Vigilantes on this jury."

Hacker nodded to that.

"Peremptory challenge, then," said Demeree.

"That takes Bigsby off," Hacker whispered.

"Off with him," said Steele; "call another, Skiffy."

"Cal Depew."

"He's all right," Hook Martin whispered to Demeree.

Depew sat beside Jinks Palmer.

"Hooker Martin, alias Spoonbill Martin," yelled Clerk Skiffington.

Nobody objected to Hook, who took his place and sat where he had a good view of lawyer Demeree.

"Art Holman," yelled Skiffy.

Hook got Demeree's eye and shook his head. He also drew his mouth corners down to signify his personal distaste for Holman; Demeree used a peremptory challenge.

"Lawson Fuzzell," yelled Skiffy.

Hook got Demeree's eye again and this time he nodded approval.

Bill Hacker pulled at Judge Steele's sleeve. "As *amicus curiae*, I wish to inform your honor that juror Hook Martin is guilty of improper conduct; he's giving signals to defense attorney Demeree."

"Huh! By thunderation, he ought to be hung."

"Suggest you have Sheriff Buckalew throw him out."

"Ahem," rumbled Judge Steele. "Spoonbill Martin, your conduct is unbecomin' a juror. You been a-settin' thar givin' signs to that lawyer over thar, when you're supposed to be on our side; Sheriff Buckalew heave this skunk out of hyar."

Bucky crooked his finger at a cluster of deputies, gave his jaw a twist, and nodded toward Hook Martin. In three shakes they had Martin by both arms, both legs and a bunch of hair.

"Hold steady a minute or two," Bill Hacker whispered to Judge Steele; "I'll be right back."

Hacker dropped down and hurried out. He arrived in time to see Hook Martin flung head-first into a horse-trough full of water. A dozen Vigies had followed Bill out. Hacker had a few words with them and came back.

"Proceed," he whispered to Judge Steele.

WHEN A JURY of twelve had been chosen, and sworn true facts to find, and a true verdict to render, Prosecutor Claybrook called for one Hosea Hankin as a witness. When Hosea had been sworn and seated on a nail keg, Claybrook said, "Were you acquainted with our late Sheriff Dubose?"

"I were."

"Did you see him on Tuesday of last week about four o'clock p.m.?"

"I did."

"Where?"

"A-layin' in Siler's Gulch, just out of town."

"What was his condition?"

"You mean was he alive or dead?"

"Yes."

"He was alive."

"What was he doing in Siler's Gulch?"

"He war there a-dyin'; putnigh dead, in fact."

Judge Steele looked to his left and met a disgraceful surprise. Not a juror was paying any attention to what was being said by either Prosecutor Claybrook or witness Hosea Hankin. Judge Steele drew his .45 and banged its big end down on his split-log table. "You jurors!" he shouted. "Pay 'tention to what's go-in' on hyar. Let me ketch you day-dreamin' again, and I'll—"

Bill Hacker tugged at Steele's sleeve. "It's all right, Ward; just let 'em go right ahead."

"Ahem! Proceed, gentlemen."

Prosecutor Claybrook asked, "Did Sheriff Dubose tell you anything?"

"He did."

"What did he tell you?"

French Demeree sprang up. "I object, your honor; object to any hearsay evidence."

Judge Steele's eyes blinked. "By thunder, I ought to have your head pulled off for that. Here we are, try-in' to do justice by a couple of mur-derin' polecats, and you object. That's just what's wrong with courts of justice; you big-mouthed law-yers—"

Hacker got Steele's attention. "Let him object, Ward."

"All right, highpockets, go on and object."

"As I was saying, your honor, what *somebody else* said is hearsay; it's not admissible in evidence."

Steele whispered to Hacker, "Now, Bill, what do I do?"

"Overrule him; this was a dying declaration. Dying declarations are admissible."

"Overruled, you ignoramus," Steele said pointedly to Demeree. "Now set down and keep your blast-ed mouth shut."

PROSPECTOR Claybrook said to witness Hankin, "What did Sheriff Dubose say to you?"

"He said he went out to arrest those two punks. Said he laid a hand on Burke Lassell's shoulder and told him he was under arrest. Said about that time a knife struck him under his right shoulder blade. Said he turned around and there was this Lewis hombre comin' at him again. Said he went for his gun, and about that time polecat Lassell shot him. Said they drug him into Siler's Gulch. Said Manker Lewis then shot him again."

"Did Sheriff Dubose know he was dying when he talked to you?"

"I reckon he must've knowed he was cashin' in. He said, 'I'm done for, Hosey. If you'd just oblige me by tellin' Bill Hacker who done it.' I told him I'd sure tell Bill. It seemed to ease his misery a heap, when I told him that."

French Demeree started to get up, but a glare from Judge Steele discouraged him.

"How long did Sheriff Dubose live after telling you those things?" Clay-brook asked.

"I reckon, no time; he was still tryin' to talk when he died."

"Cross-examine," said Claybrook, glancing at Demeree.

Demeree got up. "Hosey Hankin, were you drunk or sober when you found Dubose in Siler's Gulch?"

Judge Steele reared up with a growl. "Look here, you insinuatin' stinker! You can't insult one of our witnesses like that. Sheriff—"

Bill Hacker pulled his coattail. "Sit down, Ward; he won't do no harm."

"All right, Demeree; if you want to make an ass of yourself, why, go right ahead."

Demeree nodded at Hankin. "Answer my question."

"I was betwixt and between," said Hosea.

"How far betwixt and how far between?"

"I reckon I was just middlin' sober."

"Were you middlin' sober, or middlin' drunk?"

"I was sober enough to know my way around."

"Do you remember everything that happened to you that day?"

"Not everything."

"You remember everything Dubose told you?

"I reckon I do; I shore was listen' mighty close."

"For all you remember, he told you he got into a quarrel with these defendants; isn't that right?"

"That's a dang lie, if you want my honest opinion."

"You mean all you told Mr. Claybrook here was a dang lie?"

Judge Steele reared up again. "Look here, Demeree, that's about enough out of you. I'm beginnin' to to think we better hang you, same as those two—"

Bill Hacker pulled his coattail again. "Sit down, Ward. He ain't doin' no harm; you'll see."

Judge Steele sat down reluctantly. "See here, Bill this law business ain't no good. Vigilante was a heap better."

"Take it easy, Ward; got to get used to these aggravations."

"No more questions," French Demeree announced abruptly.

"No more witnesses," said Claybrook.

Steele cleared his throat as Claybrook stoop up. "What're you gettin' up for Wade Claybrook?"

"For my opening argument, your honor."

"Well, tarnation! Who's arguin'? Why argue anyhow?"

Hacker leaned over. "He's got a right to make a speech, Ward. Let him talk. When he's through, Demeree has his turn. Then Wade again. Let 'em go to it; 'twon't do a bit of harm."

"All right, Mr. Claybrook, go ahead and flap your lip. You got a right to, but 'pears to me like a waste of time."

CLAYBROOK and Demeree made their impassioned speeches. Meanwhile, Judge Steele was of a mind to give a jury lecture on his own. Not a man of them was paying any attention whatever to what was being said to them. It didn't make sense; it was bad manners, if nothing else. When you talked to a man, you expected him to listen. By thunder, he'd never seen such bat-brains.

When Claybrook and Demeree were through, Judge Steele asked Hacker, "What do I do now, Bill?"

"You charge—talk to the jurors now. Tell 'em to go out and decide whether these defendants are guilty of murder, or not, and after they've agreed, to come back in."

Judge Steele made a rumble in his throat. "All right, gentlemen. You go

out in this back room now and stay a while, but don't fiddle away too much time. Then come back in here. You'll find if these two varmints killed Sheriff Dubose—which they did. Then you'll find if they're guilty of murder—which they are. Then you'll hustle back—and don't come back with no tommyrot. All right, gentlemen."

They come off their high seats and filed out followed by a deputy sheriff. In about two minutes they were back.

"All right, gentlemen," said Judge Steele. "What's your answer?"

A long-jawed gold-digger stood up, glanced off distantly, then said as a man befuddled, "Guilty of first-degree murder, but under mitigatin' circumstances." He sat down.

Judge Steele leaned toward Hacker. "What did he mean by that Bill?"

"He meant they're guilty, but under circumstances that would permit you to give 'em life, instead of hangin' 'em, if you saw fit. Mitigating means there was some excuse—but not enough to get them out of first degree murder."

"You mean it's up to me, whether they hang or spend their lives in a pokey?"

"That's right, Ward."

Judge Steele swung round and glared at first one juror, then another. "Mitigatin' circumstances!" he said contemptuously. "Whar is the mitigatin' circumstances? I been lookin' fer 'em, and they ain't thar."

He swung right. "Sheriff Buckalew, take them murderin' varmints out and hang 'em, and don't let no grass grow under your boots. Court's adjourned."

Judge Steele and Bill Hacker remained where they were, while Buckalew and his prisoners and everybody else filed out.

Judge Steele glared at Hacker. "Mitigatin' circumstances! There never was a more cowardly murder; them *jurors* ought to be strung up."

Hacker shook his head. "They didn't mean that, Wardlow. They said *mitigating* because they couldn't think of a better word. What they had in mind was *intimidating*. Intimidating circumstances, that it." Hacker got up and strode over to a juror seat. "Come up here a minute, Ward, and I'll show you something."

Steele responded promptly.

OPPOSITE them, where ten-foot sections had been sawed from two logs high in the sidewall and a flapdown plank window blind was lowered, they could see out. Fifty yards beyond was a pine tree, and swinging by a hangrope from a limb was a dead man.

"What in tarnation?" exclaimed Judge Steele.

"That," said Bill, "is Hook Martin; he was obstructing justice, in a way. But that was before his conversion. After being converted, he was a good influence. I don't reckon them jurors paid any attention to what went on here in this courtroom, but they sure had a proper idea of what would happen to them, if they failed to do their duty."

"Well, blow me for a sucker," spat Judge Steele. "It's like I been tellin' you right along; Vigie ways was best. All this hullabaloo we've been through here was plain nonsense."

Hacker fished out a pipe and loaded it with tobacco crumbs. "Some ways, yes; other ways not. It takes time to change over, from what we've been having, to a system of law-and-order. You're going to make a fine judge, Wardlow; of course for a while you'll still need moral support—like today, for instance. But that's something you can count on. Just take it easy, and be patient. It's said even Rome wasn't built in a day."

"By thunder!" said Judge Steele, "You got something there, Bill. It took two weeks for Flat Creek to boom into a real town. In fact, it was three weeks before she shore enough begun to bust her seams."

★

When two go out after gold, three's a crowd, four's a mob, and somebody's bound for boothill!

NO COMPANY WANTED

By Cliff Campbell

ONE OF THE two men said, glibly, "Mornin', gents; Fletcher is my name, and this is my partner, Larch. We were just startin' on a desert prospectin' trip. And hearin' you comin', decided to wait and string along together for company."

"We don't want no comp'ny, and yuh know it! What else do yuh suppose we'd be gettin' a before-day start like this for?" Grubstake Banes barked suspiciously.

Fletcher's shoulders squared, and his beard-stubbed face hardened. In the flicker of an eye, his friendly manner dropped away. "Say, you don't own this blame desert, d'you? I can answer that: You don't! So get this straight: We're goin' your way whether we go right with you or not!"

The pair were strapping six footers, hard of face and sharp of eye. Big open-holstered sixguns rested against each man's hip, and both carried canvas-covered water canteens, swung from shoulder straps. Outlined behind them were two shaggy pack burros; there was an air of menace about the two men that said plainly as words they meant to go along regardless.

Late the day before, whiskered old Banes had slipped quietly into the little desert edge town of Big Mesquite with an air of suppressed excitement in his manner. Maintaining a close-mouthed silence until he met Cleve Trenton, he came close and lowered his voice. "I've found it! And I want yuh to go along back as a pardner. I just come in for grub and want to start again soon as possible."

Drawing from his shirt a flattened buckskin bag he exhibited fully a pound weight of gold before Trenton's startled gaze. It was real gold; No doubt about that! Thousands and thousands of little flaky rusty yellow grains of it.

Months before, Trenton had grubstaked the old prospector, and Trenton guessed now that the memory of this prompted Grubstake to come to him. But there was no doubt that the other's eagerness to have him along was real. Real as the tawny yellow gold in Grubstake's buckskin poke; and Trenton agreed at once.

Well before daylight that morning, they had set out, equipped with three well-laden pack burros. But on reaching the desert-edge limits of the handful of board and adobe structures that made up Big Mesquite, they had been suddenly confronted by the two men.

Trenton suspected that the strangers had, in some way, learned of Grub-

stake's strike. But their secrecy showed that they had as yet told no one. And two was better than a townful—which would be the case if the strike was generally known. "Better let them come without a fuss." Trenton advised.

Banes nodded reluctantly and whacked the burros into motion. All that morning while the sun rose and began to burn like a huge white-hot ball of silver in the pale blue of the sky, the two headed straight out into the trackless shifting sands of Gunpowder Sink, so called because of its terrible white-hot dryness. Pausing for a short time in the middle of the day, they were once more on their way. And keeping some distance behind Fletcher and Larch followed in sullen silence.

Finally, about mid-afternoon, Grubstake showed the first signs of interest he had displayed since morning. Raising his head he stared long and earnestly out over the desert. While he stared, a puff of wind fanned his leathery face. Dry as a bone, odorless as a vacuum and hot as a breath from hell it came—from nowhere apparently.

For a moment the breeze lingered, stirring the shaggy sweat-streaked coats of the three pack burros, and mockingly rattling the thorny branches of mesquite bushes. Then it passed on and behind it settled a lifeless and ominous calm.

To Cleve Trenton the gust of wind had little significance. Young and strong of body and tireless of leg, he made up in confidence and vitality what he lacked in observation. But hard experience had taught Grubstake a vast knowledge of the desert. And now he grunted explosively. "Sandstorm's comin' and from the feel of things I judge it's goin' to be a hummer."

Turning about he gazed hesitatingly rearward. Then he grunted in decision. "Hey, yuh fellers better start snuggin' things up. There's a sandstorm comin'!" he warned. "Yuh can bring yore animals up and bunch them with ours if yuh want to. It'll make them easier to handle and there won't be so much chance of them strayin'."

Fletcher, who was walking ahead of Larch, stared about, and his lips curled in a sneer. "Nothin' doin'. I don't see no sandstorm, and if I did don't think we'd be fools enough to put our burros with yours and let you and yore pardner run off with the whole bunch in the thick of it. You do your own worryin'. We'll look out for ourselves!"

CLEVE TRENTON'S lips set thinly as he heard Fletcher's words. On the alert from Grubstake's warning, he gazed in the direction the hot puff had come from. All he could see was a low, yellow-gray haze. But as he stared another searing gust, this time stronger than the first and carrying with it a powder of fine sand, fled past.

"Feel the grit in that wind?" Grubstake growled. "That's the startin' of it. And it's up to us to get under cover 'fore it gets here. Seems like I remember a graveled dry wash somewhere off to the left. If we can get to it 'fore the worst of the storm hits us we'll weather it out snug as yuh please." As he talked, Grubstake was busy examining the packs, and inside of five minutes they were hurrying forward.

But before they had gone hardly a hundred feet the storm broke in earnest. Filled with gritty, stinging sand that cut like a file, the wind grew steadily in strength and swiftness. Where there had been an ominous calm before there was now a menacing hissing sound on every side. As the fury of the storm increased the earth itself seemed to rise and join with the air until there was no sky overhead, nor firmness under foot, but only an enveloping yellow-gray terror through which man and beast struggled blindly.

Seconds passed into minutes and

the minutes dragged by with the slowness of hours until Cleve Trenton lost all reckoning of time and space and location. Of a sudden then, how long after the beginning of the storm he had not the faintest idea, he heard a shout from Grubstake. Lurching nearer to catch the message, he felt a sharp qualm at the strained, sober expression on Grubstake's face. "Must have been driven off our course by the wind—ought to have reached the place before now," Trenton heard. There was a gap as an unusually savage rush of wind roared by. But the last word came plainly. "Lost!"

For a space Trenton held a stunned silence, as he had no idea of their location. Then he quickly pulled himself together. The terrible, dry, ever shifting sands of Gunpowder Sink were treacherous at best. And certainly he couldn't blame Grubstake for losing his way in such a storm. "What's to be done?" he yelled.

Banes motioned ahead. "Can't stop here. No tellin' when storm will let up. Got to keep goin' fast as we can till we find shelter," he shouted back.

The plan proved a sound one; after what seemed another eternity of time and distance, a bleak head-high ridge of stone rose suddenly before them. Hastily rounding the rocky outcrop, they found themselves in comparative shelter. On either side and above, the sand-filled wind hissed venomously by. But close against the face of the rock was enough space for them and their pack animals.

Shortly after dark the wind calmed. One at a time stars began to twinkle in the vast velvety vault of the sky. Emerging from their rocky shelter, Trenton and Banes searched about for enough dried cactus and brush for a fire. Within a few minutes a cheerful blaze was going, and together they made a camp and prepared supper.

Hardly had they begun their meal though, when Grubstake paused, one hand raised for silence. For a moment both listened intently. Then Grubstake nodded. "Yuh can't lose them fellers," he snorted.

SHORTLY after, Fletcher and Larch stumbled into sight—vastly different now from the alert cocksure pair of the early morning. Their faces were sunburnt and sand-scoured; their eyes red-rimmed and weary. But the point Trenton noted with far more concern, was that the pair was alone!

"Thought you'd lose us in that storm, huh?" Fletcher growled, staring wrathfully from Banes to Trenton. "Likely you would too, if it hadn't been for this campfire givin' you away," he added.

"Where's your pack animals?" Trenton interrupted.

"Lost," Fletcher snapped. "We had trouble enough savin' ourselves without worryin' about them fool critters."

"Why, man, yuh've got to have them!" Grubstake shrilled. "Yure water was on them, wasn't it? We can't spare none, and there's no tellin' when we'll see any more. We're lost, and—"

"W-h-a-t?" Fletcher roared, stiffening. For a moment he glared from Grubstake to Trenton. Then his look of fear changed to one of crafty unbelief. "Well, listen old-timer; if you don't know where you are, and can't spare no water, you'd better do some rapid locatin' in the mornin'. We've got water in our canteens, and stuffed a little grub in our shirts 'fore the animals got away, so we'll last. But we ain't to be tricked none," he advised menacingly.

"What Grubstake says is true," Trenton broke in. "We *are* lost. But I guess you know that we are not the sort to turn man adrift in Gunpowder Sink without water. And I and my partner will fill your canteens completely full, provided you start back toward Big Mesquite at daylight." Trenton stopped as he

caught the sneering grin on Fletcher's face.

"Nothin' doin' a-tall," Fletcher snapped. "That talk about you two bein' lost don't fool us for a minute! You can keep your water on such terms! We're goin' to be right with you till you find that gold you're goin' after—or till this hell-hot desert freezes solid enough to skate over!"

Gold, gold, gold! The lure and curse of the world's waste places, and of Gunpowder Sink in particular. In the face of such an urge, Cleve Trenton knew the futility of trying to reason with the men, for he himself had felt as he knew they must feel. "Very well," Trenton said grimly. "Do as you like about going or staying. But this offer about the water is final! And I'll repeat we are lost, and haven't any idea if we'll find more before our supply gives out entirely."

Finishing their meal, Trenton and Banes unrolled their blankets and turned in. They had agreed to keep watch, with Trenton taking first turn. But it was thought best to lie as if asleep, in order not to arouse the suspicion of the two. Pulling the blanket over him, Trenton relaxed his aching muscles.

Flecther and Larch had drawn off a short way and made a fire of their own. From that direction now there was complete silence, and for a time Trenton kept himself awake considering about them. Then he turned his thoughts on the country, trying desperately to reconstruct the route they had traveled and form some idea of where they were. But shortly, realizing his inability to think in his dog-weary state he gave it up.

For some moments he lay, blank-minded and inactive. Then, catching himself nodding, he decided to count stars. There were hundreds of them, no, thousands, he decided, as his heavy-lidded, fatigue-dazed stare swept the sky. Resolutely he began to count. Little by little, though, the stars seemed to fade, to grow dimmer and more distant. Finally they vanished altogether.

WHETHER he had actually slept or not, Cleve Trenton did not know. But of a sudden he found himself wide-eyed, and straining his ears through the silence. Inch by inch he turned his head to command a view of their neatly-arranged mound of supplies. As he did so he stiffened, every nerve aquiver. In a low, half-crouching position to which he had risen after crawling across the sand, a dark form bent over their water containers!

For a brief space Trenton watched. Then, jerking off the blanket that covered him, he sprang to his knees, his right hand closing around the butt of his handily placed six-gun. But as he did there was a sudden nearer rustle of sound and he realized that Grubstake had leaped to his feet. "Get away from that water," Grubstake ordered bitterly.

With a startled cry the man straightened, his hands mounting hastily in the air. At almost the same instant from the corner of his eye, Trenton saw a lurid red tongue of flame lash out, and a shot crashed shatteringly in the darkness.

For a split-second Trenton paused, puzzled that the shot had come from a different point to either Banes or the other. Then he sensed the truth. While one of the men crawled forward to fill their two canteens the second had remained watchfully to one side in case of trouble.

It was this man now who had fired. And as Grubstake Banes sank to the ground, the man's voice came snarlingly to Trenton. "Put 'em up, you're covered! One funny move and you're done for!"

Through the darkness Trenton made out clearly now the bulky form of the man who had fired—and saw a big wicked-looking gun facing him steadily. Reluctantly he stood erect and let his gun drop to the sand.

"Good work, pard; I didn't think of that second feller, and he'd have

dulled one of us certain if it hadn't been for you," Larch grunted from his position by the water cans. "I'll collect some guns," he added.

Stepping forward, Larch jerked Trenton's big blued-steel revolver from its holster, and felt quickly over him for further weapons. Crossing to Banes, he repeated the operation. Then throwing an armload of dried twigs on the fire for light, Larch bent over Banes. But after a brief examination he rose with a grunt. "He's only plugged in the gun-arm," Larch said.

Fletcher nodded. "Yeah, I just shot to wing him. Think I'd kill him, and not have anybody to lead us to that gold? The rest of this party is goin' to be share and share alike on everything but these guns," Fletcher continued, turning to Trenton. "Me and Larch will take care of them. You two'll be free and safe long as you keep headin' toward that gold, and don't try any funny tricks!

"That's all for the present. Now you do what you can for your pard. Then the pair of you'd as well get some sleep too, for you are goin' to do a lot of walkin' tomorrow. Larch, you get some sleep, and I'll stay awake," Fletcher added to his partner.

Cleve Trenton stared at Fletcher in helpless, hot-eyed fury. It was on the tip of his tongue to insist furiously that they were lost. But realizing the futility of this, he turned silently to Grubstake and began bandaging his wounded arm.

Early morning found the four once more on their way. Neither Banes nor Trenton knew where they were. For since the terrific sandstorm of the day before Grubstake could recognize no familiar landmarks. But with the armed, gold-maddened figures of Fletcher and Larch following but a few yards behind, both Banes and Trenton knew that an effort to turn back meant death!

Appearing little different than on the day before, Gunpowder Sink stretched away on all sides, a tractless sweep of white-hot gravelly sand, spotted here and there with outcroppings of rock and an occasional Joshua tree. But never a sign of water. And at last when the sun went down, Grubstake admitted huskily to Trenton that he knew no more of where they were, than he had at sunrise.

CLEVE TRENTON had no criticism. But with their scant water supply being divided all day among four instead of two it was almost gone; and the necessity for more loomed grimly in his mind. "Looks to me like we'd better keep going soon as we eat," he suggested. "Not know where we are anyway we can't worse ourselves by traveling in the dark. We may come to some recognized mark. And it's certain better than just waiting."

"I think the same way. I've been studyin' the sun, and watchin' out for signs, and it looks to me like we ought to be nearin' some place I know shortly," Grubstake said.

The words did little to cheer Trenton; for he guessed they were meant for cheer only. After a brief rest they were once more on their way. There was no moon, and to add to their discomfort a chill wind sprang up. But both Trenton and Banes were too worn out to pay it much heed.

Walking side by side, their shaggy burros plodding dispiritedly with them, they continued onward, hour after hour and mile after mile. At last Grubstake paused, "I can't go no futher. We got to stop till mornin'," he gasped.

Trenton nodded and began to make a small fire from scraps of fuel brought along from the last camp. For a space he kept silent; then as Grubstake faced him he put a question. "Didn't you see anything familiar as we come along?" he asked. He realized what the answer would be. For he knew Grubstake would have told him of even the slightest

hopeful sign. But he couldn't resist asking.

Grubstake shook his head wearily. "No, I'm just as completely lost as I was an hour after that sandstorm," he admitted honestly, then ceased at the stealthy crunch of footsteps behind them.

All day Fletcher and Larch had kept to the rear. Every time they paused to eat they moved up; but shortly afterward dropped back until some distance separated them. Now, as Fletcher stepped into the flickering ring of firelight, his face was set and harsh.

Of a sudden Cleve Trenton knew he had heard the query and Banes' reply! And that since his presence had been unknown at the time he at last realized they had spoken the truth!

For a moment Fletcher stared speechlessly from Trenton to Banes, so great was his rage and disappointment. Then his reddened sun-scorched features grew redder still and his eyes flamed venomously. "Say, I heard that! I crept up quiet to see if you were plannin' any tricks! Then you two really are lost!"

"Smart guys Larch and me are, followin' such fools. Well, we won't follow you any longer, nor waste any more water on you either! You—you—" Fletcher's words died away to an incoherent mutter, unable to find words to express his fury. His blistered sand-cut face showed distorted and terrible. His red-rimmed sun-scorched eyes glared savagely! Of a sudden his hand flashed to his hip, his intent unmistakable.

On the instant, with a kick that scattered and extinguished their small fire, Cleve Trenton leaped straight at Fletcher! So close that the flash almost blinded him, Fletcher's gun flamed red. Then Trenton's groping hand closed on Fletcher's wrist, forcing the weapon up. And like two savage animals they clenched in a battle each knew could end now only in the death of one.

No, not in the death of one but of two, if he lost, Trenton realized as the flickering light of an ember showed Grubstake Banes stagger to his feet, then sink back helplessly from exhaustion and the pain of his wounded arm.

UNDER the stress of these thoughts Trenton felt other sensations vanish in the single savage lust of battle. Slowly and relentlessly he twisted Fletcher's arm until the gun slipped from his fingers. Then Trenton stepped suddenly back and planted his fist joltingly in Fletcher's leering face. "Fight!" he ordered grimly, following Fletcher up as he backed away. "Fight, blast you!"

Recovering from the blow Fletcher sprang savagely forward; and the two stood toe to toe, and slugged in complete disregard of personal injury, until Trenton stared groggily through a battered red mist of swinging arms and jarring fists.

Then suddenly there came a thud of steps and Larch moved warily forward, pistol in hand. "Back off from him so I can end it! Want to get killed while I'm killin' him?" Larch rasped at Fletcher. Fletcher sprang back instantly and Larch's gun-arm tensed. But even as it did another gun flamed red. Larch crumbled to the ground.

Staring dazedly in the direction of the shot Trenton noted that Grubstake Banes, had risen and that the gun Fletcher had dropped smoked from his trembling old hand! Then Trenton's heart seemed to stop. Fletcher also had turned, and noted Grubstake—and he was several feet nearer the other than Trenton! With a snarl of rage and triumph, he launched himself at Banes. Grasping his wrist he began to force the weapon from Banes' weakened grip.

Seeing it would be impossible for him to reach Fletcher before he had gained possession of the pistol, Trenton spun about and leaped to where Larch lay. Seizing the pistol that had slipped from his lifeless fingers, Tren-

ton whirled just as Fletcher hurled Banes to the earth and turned with an oath of triumph—gun gleaming in his outstretched hand. But in the split-second space of Fletcher's aiming, Trenton's weapon flamed two vivid orange spurts of death; and Fletcher sank dead on the sand, his gun roaring harmlessly as he fell!

"That ends that," Trenton said dazedly, as the tension relaxed.

Grubstake Banes nodded dully, "Yeah; and now they're dead let's get some sleep 'fore we are too."

●

It was broad daylight when Cleve Trenton awoke and looked gloomily out over the desert which stretched away as before. Shaking Grubstake into wakefulness, he motioned toward the horizon. "We got to be moving. It's going to be hot shortly —and our water is clear gone," he reminded his partner.

Banes got up. He stared off over the desert; blinked rubbed his eyes and stared again. "Never mind the water! Do yuh know what that is over there?" he shouted excitedly.

"No, what is it?" Trenton asked, feeling a hope he dared not put in words.

"T h a t," Grubstake sputtered, pointing to a low, peculiarly shaped point of rock outlined against the horizon, "is the nearest landmark to where I made my strike! We're sideways to it 'stead of in front. But that's it all right; and about two miles over it there is the big spring that comes out of the rocks, along the stream bed of which I found the gold I showed yuh!"

PAUSING, Grubstake B a n e s stared thoughtfully at the two sprawled forms on the sand and went on. "That extra distance we covered last night is what put us in sight of it; and if them fellers had just waited till this mornin', things would have turned out different. I guess that's what yuh'd call justice of the desert," he ended, wagging his head solemnly.

Cleve Trenton nodded; for the swift, tense events of the past two days had given him a vastly greater respect for all deserts, and for Gunpowder Sink in particular.

★

★

THE TRADING POST

(*Continued From Page* 8)

itself, it evoked only passing interest and a little head shaking; but for it's implications it aroused much interest and speculation. Attorney Jennings was the brother of Al Jennings, at that time high on the list of wanted Western outlaws and just about as deadly a man as existed with a gun.

At small campfires far out in the hills and prairies of the West's vast domain, bearded and heavily-armed men smiled knowingly at one another. The case was far from closed, although the verdict had been handed down.

Several months went by, and the story had all but been forgotten by the casual citizens—replaced, no doubt, by newer and more sordid affairs that marked the growth and progress of the frontier. But among the men who rode the haunted back trails, the owlhooters, there was knowledge that things were in the wind.

Preacher Jennings was a strong man. His belief in the ways of the Lord was unshakable, but at times the hot blood that ran in his body cried out for vengeance against those who had murdered his son—the only son he had who was a credit to his Christian upbringing. Sadness and sorrow were etched deeply into his aging face. He prayed for forgiveness for thinking

of revenge and wrestled with the fury that coursed like prairie-fire through him.

One evening the gaunt minister sat reading beside the parlor table when there was a knock at his door. Closing the book, he crossed the room, opened the door and froze in his tracks. "You. Haven't we been scourged and cursed with enough sadness and death without you coming here. Leave this threshold and never again set foot on it. Go back where you came from; the sight of you only cuts deeper into the wound my soul carries."

The man in the darkness of the outside shouldered his way roughly into the room. Preacher Jennings closed the door, and stood with his back to it, unwilling to admit that the visitor was inside. Turning the lamp down, the visitor turned to the Preacher after a probing look about the room.

"Listen to me Preacher, and don't interrupt. There has been a murder committed—a killing without cause, and you stand there denouncing the one who would avenge it. What kind of a man are you that you won't protect or avenge the things that are dear to you? Listen to me. I have come a long way and my horse is tired; I am going to spend the night hereabouts and in the morning I am going to avenge your son. "Then," there was bitterness in the cutting voice, "then I'll leave and you'll never have to look at me again."

The Preacher moved away from the door with a resolute step and faced the visitor. "You will never get to avenge my son; you are a killer, and a wanted man, and I will turn you in to the Sheriff. You'll get what is coming to you for taking the prerogative of the Lord into your own hands."

Whatever else the fiery minister was going to say was never said. The man before him swung from the ground and his gloved fist ended its powerful arc against the minister's square chin. Like a pole-axed steer, the preacher collapsed on the carpet, and the aggressor tied him securely with rope, rolled him into a corner. Then the other went outside, where he put his leg-weary horse into the barn, hayed and grained him, caught a fresh mount and left—a shadowy figure, wraith-like and deadly, loping over the flat prairie beneath the lowering black clouds and sighing, wild wind of the night.

WITH THE first streaks of dawn across the sky, Preacher Jennings was discovered, still trussed but wide awake, a sullen red splotch on his jaw. He had regained consciousness during the night but had remained on the floor, too heartsick to struggle against his bonds. More grief than most fathers know in a lifetime was his. He had prayed for guidance and for mercy, had asked for forgiveness, too, for the thing he knew he must do.

With leaden, dragging footsteps, Preacher Jennings went to the sheriff's office. He told the lawmen what he knew, and his throat was tight in the awkward silence that followed his revelation. The law-officers, hard men in a hard era, eyed the Preacher with somber stares. How could a man do it? How could any father, regardless of his calling, do the thing Jennings Senior was doing? They thanked the minister quietly, patted his slumped

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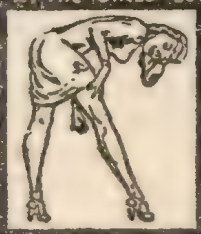

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shoulders gruffly, and sent him home.

There was silence in the sheriff's office after Jennings had left. These men had known Attorney Jennings well; they had admired him and enjoyed his dry humor. As a matter of course, they had apprehended Houston after the killing—but couldn't hold him because of hired witnesses. Those men had standards and ethics too, despite their rough exteriors; in their personal world, vengeance—under the circumstances—was what they expected and condoned. Early-day Western law was not always interpreted according to Eastern law-books, or Eastern standards. It couldn't be, for the frontier was built on the premise of an-eye-for-an-eye-and-a-tooth for-a-tooth—without which there would have been no frontier, just a great plain of graveyards.

Word of Preacher Jennings' revelation spread across the countryside. It was too late in the day for Houston to get the news, however, and after a quiet day at his office—during which he possibly planned for his climb back to the Senatorial power he had once enjoyed, he closed up and started for home. It was dusk and the prairie sky was ablaze with the blood-red sun, setting in the West and reflections of the dazzling, bloody light reflected, symbolically, against the harsh falsefronts and unpainted, gaunt square corners of the town.

Lawyer Houston had to pass a loading-platform beside the railroad depot. It was almost dark when he got there, and the platform high off the ground, appeared as innocent as it always had. Lawyer Houston scarcely cast it a glance as he swung along, whistling a catchy tune of the day. Suddenly a .45 caliber Colt thundered its malevolent roar and the lawyer was knocked sideways by the impact of a bullet. He lay threshing in agony as a black figure detached itself from the gloomy shadows of the station platform and disappeared into the gathering darkness. Before the

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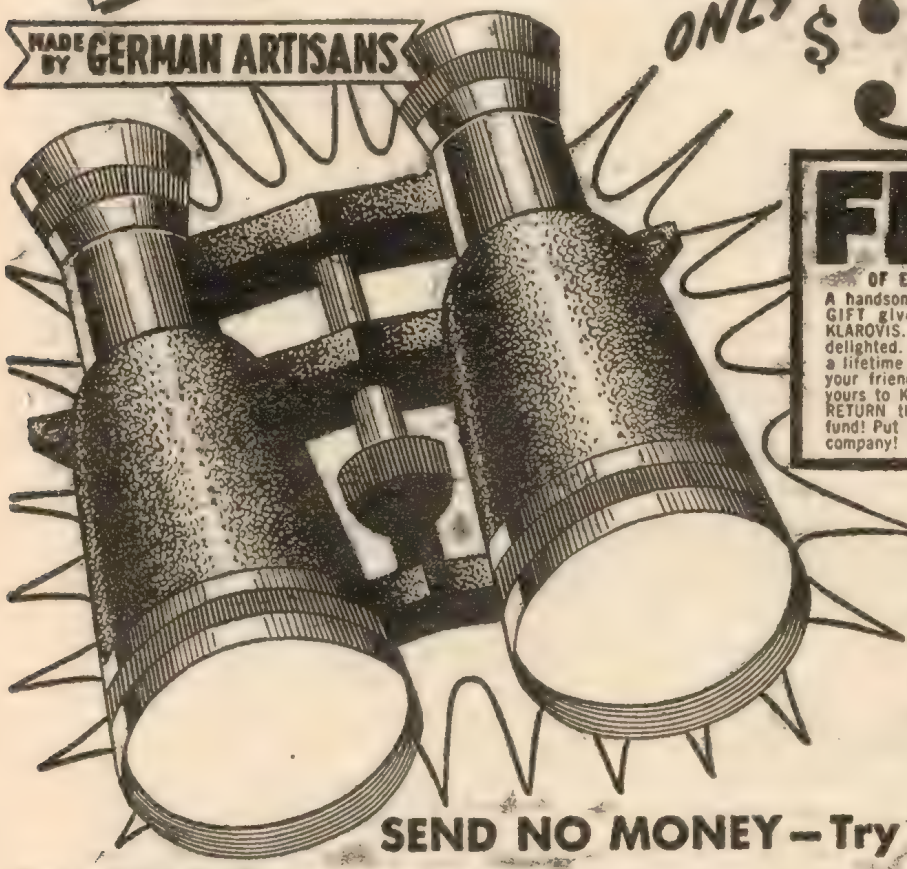

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sound of drumming hoofbeats were lost in the night, a crowd of startled people gathered around Houston, hastily staunched the flow of blood, and made ready to bear him to his home.

What had happened that evening long ago, actually was an attempted murder for—according to later records and testimony—Houston was not armed. At the time of the shooting, the assassin did not know this, and said later that it wasn't Houston's policy to wear a gun where it showed. This is very possible, since the gun with which he had killed Attorney Jennings was a hideout gun, or derringer-type of firearm, seldom visible. However, armed or unarmed, the shooting was not planned or consumated with regard to the attorney's ability to defend himself. It was a case of attempted murder, clear and simple; but also it was a deed done in accordance with prevailing custom of that day. And while many people took the view that the assassin was a coward and a murderer, there were others who firmly believed that vengeance justified its own means and ends.

At any rate Houston lay for many days between life and death. The bullet had torn into his throat and paralyzed him. He was unable to speak or lift a hand—two circumstances which saved his killer, if, as the case may be, Houston had recognised him. This; however, is doubtful because of the faulty lighting and the fact that the shot was fired without warning and struck an unsuspecting man.

Houston died, in time, and the assassin became a murderer. He had lurked about in the outlands of the area, waiting to see if a second shot was necessary; when his victim died, he took to the trail, satisfied that vengeance had been taken and that the soul of Attorney Jennings could rest in peace.

Such was the code of the early

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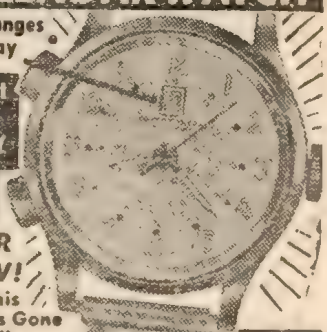

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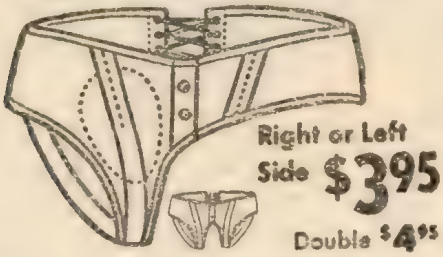

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West, an-eye-for-an-eye, and many an unmarked grave to this day bears the remains of a victim or a slayer, or a vengeance-taker, similar in deeds to those chronicled here.

NATURALLY, the news of Houston's slaying spread like wildfire and the dormat sympathies with one side or the other were resurrected. The method of vengeance was instrumental in bringing the wrath of the countryside down on the head of the Jennings faction. At any rate, when the killer rode into a small town to replenish his supplies, the prairie telegraph had sent advance news of his coming and the cross-roads community was waiting.

Across the roadway from the general store, where the killer was to enter, two men hid with Winchester rifles. Two more gunmen secreted themselves in an abandoned building, next to the store; the grocer himself lay a loaded shotgun beneath the counter, and hid a loaded sixshooter in his belt, beneath his apron.

The outlaw rode into town, unsuspectingly, tied his horse in front of the store, dismounted and entered. He happened to look behind him as he entered and caught a fleeting glance of a hidden gunman across the road. In a flash, he knew that he had walked into a trap and spun to face the storekeeper—who was in the midst of a dive for his sixshooter. The outlaw's

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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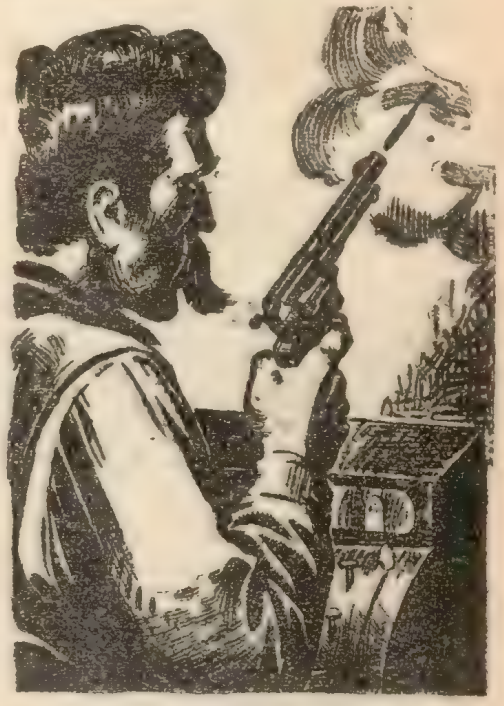
hand flashed downwards with the speed and desperation of a striking rattler and came up with a flaming gun. The storekeeper's gun was in sight but it never went off; the outlaw's gunfire was deafening in the building and the storekeeper fell to the floor fatally wounded.

The embattled gunman spun towards the door, saw the hidden gunmen firing in his direction and whirled in time to see the blood-splattered storekeeper raise himself on an elbow and attempt to cock his pistol. In two steps the outlaw was over the wounded man and aiming his sixshooter. His second shot tore into the storekeeper's head. Running toward the door, the outlaw knew that his chances of escape were almost non-existent; but also he realized that to stay in the store was certain death.



In a hail of lead from many hidden gunmen, the outlaw yanked his horse loose from the hitching rail, flung himself aboard and spun away from the store. He didn't need to spur his frightened mount because the animal

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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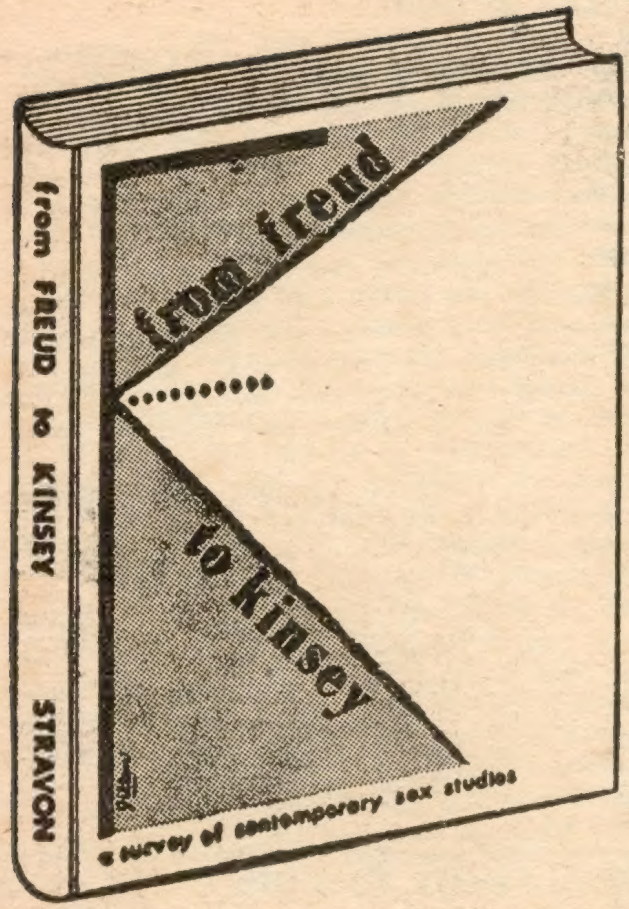
was frantic with fear; but out of force of habit he hung his spurs into the horse and rode low in the saddle.

Almost clear of the village and nearly out of rifle range, Houston's killer was beginning to straighten in the saddle, hardly daring to believe that he was free from the trap, when he felt a sharp piercing pain in his leg below the knee; at the same time his horse rolled heavily, end-over-end, throwing him into a narrow gully that ran parallel along the prairie behind the town.

Pulling himself up to the edge of the gully, the outlaw peered through squinted eyes toward the town. The firing had ceased and men seemed to be in the store he had so abruptly vacated. His wound was not serious, but the bullet, in going through the horse, killing it, had emerged and penetrated his leg muscles behind the bone. It was a painful wound but not crippling; the outlaw lay in concealment until darkness, then stole another horse, and lit out for the comparative security of the owlhoot trail.

Preacher Jennings' face was granite when he heard that his nocturnal visitor had escaped from the trap laid for him and was now at large. The minister died before he ever saw the

[*Turn To Page* 130]



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[*Continued From Page* 128]

outlaw again; and despite claims that he never forgave the avenger, it wasn't reasonable to believe that his lips didn't utter a prayer to his maker for the killer. Jennings was a devout man, and forgiveness was part of his creed.

For a long time, information leading to the arrest and conviction of the unknown gunman promised a large reward, but no one ever collected it. Few people could swear to his identity, anyway, and the money wouldn't do a dead man any good; so, if any witnesses to Houston's killing lived, they preferred to continue in that estate rather then to run the risk of being the wealthiest men in the graveyard.

NOW, IN closing, I would like to clear up several factors that unquestionably are in your minds. One, I have avoided mentioning any towns or cities, or names of those not directly implicated in the killings. Two, I have given the killer, or avenger, no identity. Remember, of all offenses, murder alone has no legal statute of limitation; a man can be tried for murder at any time, whether the crime was committed sixty-years ago or yesterday.

The reason I have been so careful? The gunman eulogised here is still alive. He is far up in his eighties now. A straight-backed, alert and tough old-timer who has won the respect and admiration of all who know him. He is a wonderful old man, and by giving away his identity it is not at all impossible that some shyster would try to make a name for himself by resurrecting the old charge.

Let's study the affair for what it is—an honest portrayal of life as it was along our frontier in the early days, and give thanks that there were such men to build our West, its traditions and its history.

★

A Texas Man Spells Trouble

(*continued from page* 105)

ter and his gang ambushed us. Joyce Edwards, after her dad died, was the owner."

"And you were in love with her?"

"I reckon I was. She was drivin' the chuck wagon that day, just for the change. I'll never forget...and the flour. It was white like driftin' snow fallin' across her face..."

"But, you will forget." She was standing close to him, her face uptilted to his. "Don't you see, you can't live with memories? You've been carrying your hatred and your sorrow like an open wound. Won't you give it a chance to heal?"

And then his eyes were no longer shadowed and there was something within them as if life had paused and looked through and found what it saw to its liking. "You haven't answered my question," he reminded her. "What will you do?"

She turned abruptly, walking to the doorway. Behind her, old Les Howdon stirred and grunted, lifting his silvery head from the bed upon which they had placed him.

"I'll go with you," Madge said, "if you'll let me." Her eyes were upon the uneven purple line of the hills. "There are ghosts for me here, too." "Maybe that's where I belong.. With you."

Bob Howdon, in surprise and a sort of dawning wonder, knew that she might be right. That, without question, a day would come when the three of them could join in the freedom of laughter. The ugly core of hate was broken. Trotter was dead, and, without Trotter, Mason and the rest of the empire would surely fall apart like an arch without a keystone.

And there was Texas, where life was hard as life should be hard. A crucible in which to try the temper of a man and a woman.

"You could be right," Bob Howdon said, and he smiled...

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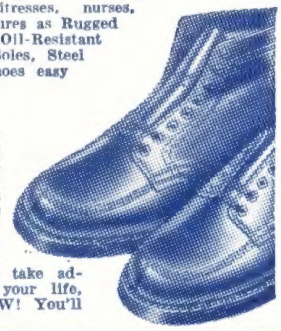

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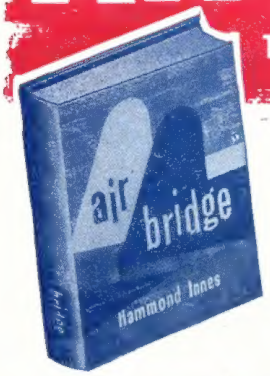

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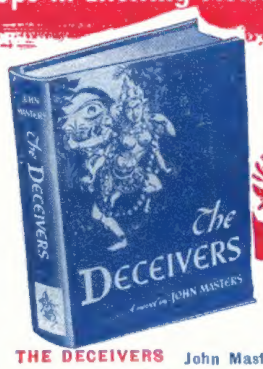

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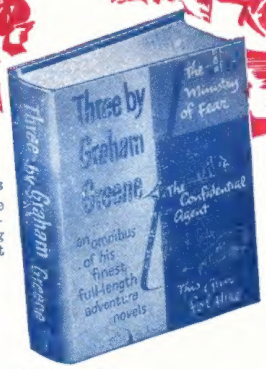

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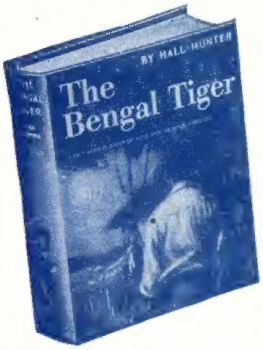

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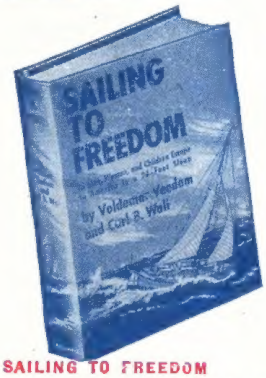

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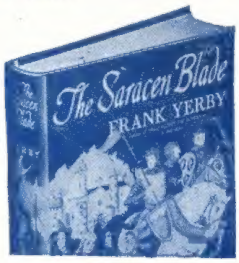

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